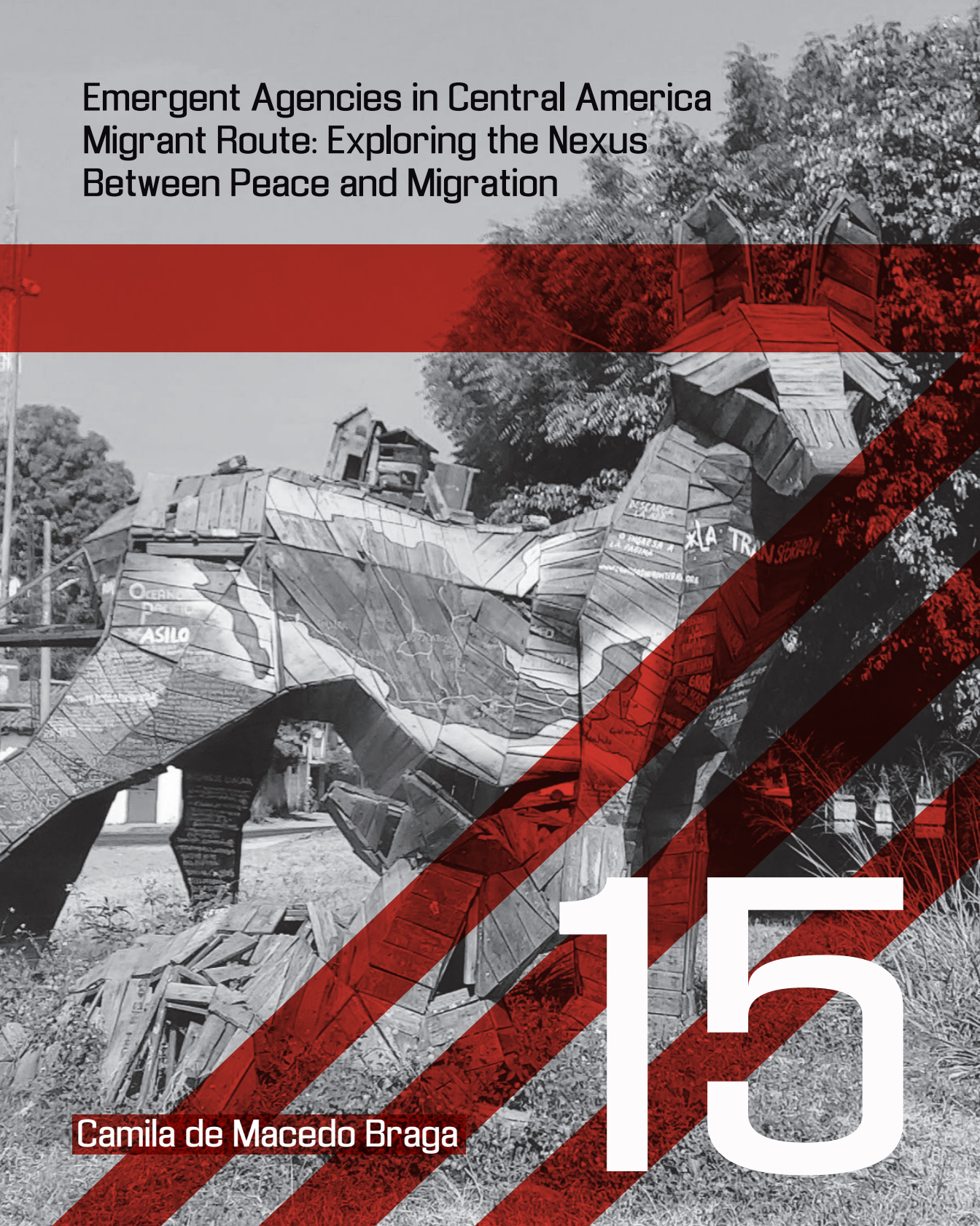# Emergent Agencies in Central America Migrant Route: Exploring the Nexus Between Peace and Migration

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Camila de Macedo Braga

Emergent Agencies in Central America Migrant Route: Exploring the Nexus Between Peace and Migration

Camila de Macedo Braga

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Emergent Agencies in Central America Migrant Route: Exploring the Nexus Between Peace and Migration

Abstract

IOn January 14, 2020, a new Central American Caravan left San Pedro Sula: the first of that year. Although the COVID-19 pandemic was only starting, these caravans would continue. By March 2021, an unprecedented number of Central American migrants were located on the border with the United States. In complex humanitarian emergencies such as this, not only the causes and effects are multiple, but so are the ways in which States and societies respond to them. By observing these responses, we established the link between peace, violence, and migration in three ways. First, we briefly analyze the Central American path to peace since the signing of the Esquipulas-II Agreement by all regional state authorities in 1987, building up a critique of the hegemonic vision of peace imprinted in the said treaty and observing how human mobility was part and process of this transitional period. The second part develops the theoretical approach based on Oliver Richmond's work on peace formation. In this section, we seek to position the current migratory crisis within the overlaying efforts of local authorities, regional states, and the international society in promoting an enduring peace within the region. The research addresses the historicity as well as the political, social, and economic function of the migrant bodies in forming a new social order, the subject of the hegemonic vision of peace since the 80s and 90s. In a third moment, through an ethnographic exploration, we observe several responses developed by state and social actors when addressing migration. Through these responses, we derive the relevant role of fluid social networks in dealing with or preventing some forms of violence and their capacity to reinforce the infrastructures of peace in the region. Nevertheless, other social networks operating in the same time and space, sometimes even interconnecting with the first ones, are responsible for increasing migrants-based networks' vulnerability to cooption, control, and grave human rights violations. Like this, we aim to provoke a reflection on the process that gave rise to the Central American Migrant Caravans, positioning the migrant and associated social networks as critical forms of agency and integral parts of the social transformation process for building peace in the region..

Emergent Agencies in Central America Migrant Route: Exploring the Nexus Between Peace and Migration

Introduction

When describing Central American migration, many Central Americans, as well as international observers, would name it a "forced migration," as individuals fled profound forms of violence and poverty. Until 1980, forced migration was an effect of the civil wars and disseminated armed conflicts in the region, particularly Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Since then, the regional States have started a slow-paced process towards peace. What of today? The question may be simple, but the answer is not. In order to unpack the nexus between violence, peace, and migration and address the role of migrant and their protection networks in engendering peace, this work engages in a qualitative analysis and ethnographic account of how migration is perceived and experienced in recent history and by those whose everyday lives are affected by it.

Central America emerged from decades of armed conflict between the later years of 1980 and the 1990s. Since then, a complex transitional process started to lead Central American societies to the promised democratic peace imbued in the narratives of their political leaders and the letter of the Esquipulas II Treaty, signed in 1987. Nevertheless, as thousands of Central American citizens walk towards the Mexican border with the United States, joined by others from South America and the Caribbean, we must ask ourselves, "What form of 'peace' is emergent in that region?" Peace and violence do not exist separately, they are always in relation. Without some form of pre-existing violence, it would be unnecessary to think or speak about peace. Therefore, we chose not to speak of peace as an objective goal or an end-state, but of peace formation (Richmond, 2016). Peace formation, for this work, entails the endogenous process of social transformation where societies transition from a state of systemic violence to an idealized state of peace.

The conception of peace formation proposes an alternative way of analyzing the process that some have described as a precursor for the so-called hybrid peace, the probable (and empirically observed) deviation from the original project that aims to build a liberal peace, according to the critical lens (Richmond, 2019, 2016, 2012; Chandler, 2014; Mac Ginty, 2012 2010; Jabri, 2010; Paris, 2004). Within this process, resulting from the appropriation, translation, integration, and friction between different visions, concepts, and practices of peace, frequently relocated into a context for which they were not originally intended, new

subjects and subjectivities emerge. They represent new forms of agency in a dynamic process of social transformation to create an imagined form of peace, contemporarily designed as a liberal peace project by most representatives of the established international order (Braga, 2017).

In Central America's emerging liberal order, the *status quo* actors are identified with vested interests in the region, such as global great powers (e.g., the United States), other nation-states, and international organizations. Interacting with them, we find alternative forms of agency, such as new types of organization and leadership, from prior armed groups or social movements, licit or illicit, and also those individuals whose lives were collectively affected by prior armed violence, including ethnic and social minorities, displaced people, and refugees. Thus, through the notion of 'peace formation,' Central America's evolving forms of social organization, such as migrants and associated social networks, materialize and are positioned within a dynamic process of social change. The present work will focus on these emergent agencies, developing the discussion in three stages.

First, we present the most important transformations in Central America's political and social systems after the Civil War. This section addresses how the regional peace process was shaped by a 'liberal peace' framework (i.e., the liberal script for peace), which conditioned the emerging social changes. As such, it will focus particularly on post-conflict Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador. The argument developed first establishes a critique of the pacification, democratization, and transnationalization processes overlapping in the post-armed conflict reforms and re-building processes, and, within these dynamic changes, it will highlight the migration problem. Migration, or more specifically, 'forced migration,' is presented within the continuum of violence (Cockburn, 2004) that follows the transitional period from internal civil wars toward more peaceful social orders. At this point, the word 'continuum' is stressed since migration is experienced as violence in both war and non-war scenarios.

Next, the current debate in peace studies and migration is analyzed under the lens of critical peace studies. Sustained in discourse and practice as a liberal (or even neoliberal) peace, the model of peace that the international community (as a whole) seeks to adopt has not been successfully translated to post-colonial contexts, where societies have historically evolved differently. Whenever it was pursued, liberal peace gave rise to exclusionary policies, repressive and autocratic state bureaucracies, and new forms of violence. Forced migration is one of them. Furthermore, in this section, the works of Oliver Richmond (2016) on peace formation and James Scott (1990) on infra-politics and social transcripts are expanded by establishing the dynamic links between peace formation processes and the developing agencies for peace governance in the context of forced migration. However, as discussed in the final section, some social networks created for protection efforts are also vulnerable to cooption by state and non-state parties, with different agendas, particularly when facing state actors' enhanced efforts to criminalize certain forms of mobility.

Finally, the third section, based on fieldwork explorations in the Central American migrant route between January and February 2020[1] and, later, between January and February 2023[2], analyzes how different forms of agency for peace-oriented actions operate under divergent perspectives on what peace means and how it could be achieved. The last section explores the functional role of migrants and associated social networks for the regional peace formation process, their organic presence, and their potential to promote non-violent social change.

In developing this argument, the current migratory crisis, symbolically represented by the Central-American caravans (between 2018-2021[3]), will be more readable within the transitional peace processes initiated in the eighties and nineties and their evolving liberal scripts. Although the traditional top-down approaches for stabilization and peacebuilding developed by state agents and international organizations are considered, this work focuses particularly on the marginalized practices and perspectives for bottom-up peacebuilding in Central America, emphasizing the role of critical agencies at the local level, whose everyday work offers a different measure of peace in the governance of migration and violence prevention.

Finally, this essay advances a normative agenda for investigating alternative forms of agency that could and should be included when planning sustainable peacebuilding efforts in Central America.

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1   The first fieldwork was conducted between January 9 and February 11 (including participant observation and 20 interviews (including two focus group discussions) along the Central American migrant route: Honduras – San Pedro Sula, Progreso y Tegucigalpa; El Salvador – San Salvador; Guatemala – Ciudad de Guatemala, Mexico – Oaxaca, DF, Sierra Tarahumara, Chihuahua, and Ciudad Juárez.).

2   The second fieldwork included in this paper focused on the Guatemala-Mexican border, and the interviews were conducted both in Ciudad Guatemala and online, covering Guatemala's side of the border and Tapachula (Chiapas, Mexico). For the later segment, in Tapachula, online interviews were conducted with Mexican researchers, authorities, and humanitarian and civil agencies between February and March 2023. In total, this second mission involved participatory observation and 37 key informant interviews (17 in Mexico DF and Tijuana; 20 in Guatemala City and Tapachula, MEX).

3   The migrant caravans were organized starting in 2021, mainly in Tapachula, a Mexican border town that, over the years, has welcomed a great number of migrants (displaced people, refugees, and asylum seekers) from all over the world.

CHAPTER I

Liberal Peace in Central America and the Migration Problematic

Peace talks in Central America started in the early years of 1980 with the support of the Contadora Group (Panama, Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela), whose leaders expressed concern about the availability of arms and military expansionism in the region and the violent conflicts' death toll. At that time, more than 300,000 lives had been lost in armed conflict, and two million Central Americans had to flee their homes (Kurtenbach, 2010). A decade later, those numbers were considerably higher and (although the entrenched Cold War power politics barred the initial progress of the Contadora Group), at the end of the 1980s, war fatigue had left many Central Americans hoping for peace (Löfving, 2007).

The Esquipulas process started with increasing support from local elites and international authorities, culminating in the Esquipulas-II Treaty, signed in 1987. The general accord represented the official starting point for the regional peace process. At that moment, Central-American presidents Óscar Arias from Costa Rica, Daniel Ortega from Nicaragua, José Azcona Hoyos from Honduras, José Napoleón Duarte from El Salvador, and Marco Vinicio Cerezo Arávelo from Guatemala "pledged to initiate processes of democratization and national dialogue, to end the war and forge a destiny of peace, and to promote free and fair elections in their respective countries" (Fernández Rupérez, 2007, p. 9).

The comprehensive peace treaty set the foundations for the subsequent peace accords between the Sandinista government and the US-funded Contras in Nicaragua at the end of 1989: between the right-wing government and the *Frente Farabuno Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN) guerrilla in El Salvador, 1992, and the neoliberal business coalition governing Guatemala, its oligarch-backed army and the guerrilla movement in 1996. These instruments further defined the normative setting for the establishment of a "strong and durable peace" in the region. Therefore, it is important to understand how the liberal script imbued in the letter of these peace accords interpreted and, thus, conditioned the reality and possibility of peace for Central American countries and the region as a whole.

The dominant narrative was infused with a liberal normative frame based on what was called 'The Esquipulas Trident': peace, democracy, and development, or more appropriately, pacification, democratization, and economic liberalization (i.e., the liberal peace ideology). Four distinct processes were strategically designed to pursue the three aims, involving: first, the re-organization of the public security sector, which includes

dealing with demobilization and reintegration activities, security sector reform, and spoilers activity, in addition to prior and emerging forms of violence; secondly, the political system's reestablishment under democratic norms, through liberalization and inclusion of marginalized sectors, as well as mitigation of polarized environments; in third, the establishment of civil forms of conflict regulation, based on the rule of law; and forth, the use of natural and human resources in peace-time economic developments, in which states must transition from existing war economies to achieve peace dividends (i.e., market-based reforms) (Kurtenbach, 2010, p. 6).

Nonetheless, the post-war transformations advanced by these four strategic processes would not happen in a vacuum or even under optimum conditions. Together, they entail a multilevel and frictional process involving different agencies, dynamics, time horizons, and the strong international influence over post-warring societies. The pursued transformations, headed by international and regional (political and military) elites, were also mediated by their historical, cultural, and social foundations. These foundations structured and defined the realm of possibilities for peace and peacebuilding initiatives, limited by what the States and their societies had witnessed over the years and the legacies of preceding violence. Thus, constrained and uneven peace processes started in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala.

The Esquipulas Peace Accords, from 1986 to 1987, represented the firm commitment of Central American states to bring about an age of democracy for the region.[4] It started with Nicaragua's presidential election in 1990, in which the opposition candidate, Violeta Barrios, defeated the ruling Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN). However, Barrios' mission of pacifying the war-torn country and mending its social fabric would be challenged by the State's inability to deal with the mounting economic crisis.

In turn, the Chapultepec Accords, in January 1992, sealed the end of El Salvador's armed conflict, leading to the electoral process of 1994 that marked the beginning of a bipartisanship pollical system, with a majority in favor of the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), and the electoral counterweight of the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN), converted into a political party. El Salvador's transitional period would not be easier. However, its problems were seen as more social and economic than political, such as rising criminality (the maras and pandillas), emigration flows (particularly to the U.S.), and the State's economic dependency on remittances (Rosales-Valladares & Molina, 2022, pp. 285-7).

In 1996, the last process was initiated when Guatemala's warring parties signed the Firm and Lasting Peace Agreement, but again, with little impact on the actual power relations, as economic and military power remained with the ruling elites in alliance with the hegemonic powers. A "disjointed, fluid and volatile party system" was established to confer a manner of democracy to the weak/nascent political system (Rosales-Valladares & Molina, 2022, p. 288).

A decade later, observers noted that the Central American governments, democratically

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4   Although some democratic practices were slowly being introduced to the region, liberal democratic regimes only began to be established in Central America after the US intervention in Panama that brought down General Manuel Antonio Noriega's regime (1989) (Rosales-Valladares & Molina, 2022, p. 284).

elected, presented moderated signs of stability and economic recovery. However, the efforts to consolidate democratic institutions and subordinate the armed forces and other state security agencies to the civil authorities were ongoing. Regional leaders supported the creation of human rights attorney offices and the establishment of public defenders to guarantee monitoring and accountability in human rights matters. Nevertheless, civilian oversight over the armed forces was underprioritized, as states favored the capacity development and deployment of the new civilian public security forces (Fernández Rupérez, 2007, p. 9). The regional leaders also facilitated the constituency of National Reconciliation Commissions to promote societal reconciliation. They developed and promoted regional integration and coordination proposals, such as the Central American Parliament (PARLACEN), the Inter-American Court of Justice or the Central American Integration System (SICA), among other initiatives (Ibid.).

Notably, the 1987 Esquipulas II Agreement considered the massive displacement flows happening at that time as a critical element in regional conflicts. Between the 1980s and early 1990s, around three million Central American citizens fled the intra-regional violence, seeking refuge in neighboring countries, particularly the United States (Bradley, 2004). Building on the Esquipulas process, the International Conference on Central American Refugees (CIREFCA) was established as "a process to support solutions to displacement that played out between 1989 and 1995, drawing together regional governments, donors, and NGOs, under the leadership of UNHCR and UNDP" (Ibid., p. 5). CIREFCA's contributions amounted to $422.3 million, destined to support the local integration and return projects benefiting 45,000 Guatemalans, 62,000 Nicaraguans, and 27,000 Salvadorans. In addition, the Development Program for Displaced Persons, Refugees, and Returnees in Central America (PRODERE) provided $115 million for reintegration activities. Generally, regional governments promoted 'return' (or 're-displacement') as the optimal solution for displacement due to armed violence. However, considering the protracted and regionalized nature of the local conflicts, support for integration[5] gradually increased (Betts, 2009, pp. 87-9, cited in Bradley, 2014, p. 5).

In terms of economic recovery, Central America's gross domestic product has increased substantially since the 1990s, but economic growth was still below Latin America's average. The emerging State's institutional weakness and lack of fiscal capacity favored not only the rise of informal and criminal economies but also increased dependence on remittances sent particularly from the United States (Rosales-Valladares & Molina, 2022). Hence, although forced migration during wartime was considered a critical issue within the regional peace process, it had become essential for the developing economies as they transitioned from war to peace systems. Next section presents a more detailed discussion of this argument.

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5   Regarding human displacement, after the war ends, options such as return, integration, or resettlement in a third country are considered the 'durable solutions' usually adopted and adapted by domestic actors and the international community in post-conflict peacebuilding strategies.

An Introduction to the Peace-Migration Nexus in Central America

In the post-war societies emerging in Central America, mobility causes were multiple and complex. Some of them, in fact, could be found at the root of the state-led peace processes focusing on the development of internationally-promoted standards for economic liberalization. The introduction of liberalization policies within the region took place in parallel to the democratization processes, which had already started during wartime over international pressures, particularly from the United States. International assistance was made conditional to implementing structural adjustment programs and opening the national economies to global markets. The liberalization process, however, produced a dual negative impact on the emerging orders: first, it weakened the states' options to offer employment in the formal sector, needed for the reintegration of ex-combatants, migrants, and displaced people; at the same time, it facilitated the establishment of new monopolies partly based on criminal and violent networks, legacies of war times (Kurtenbach, 2010).

In Nicaragua, for example, in the period after the Sandinistas' 1990 electoral defeat, the new government promoted the country's economic liberalization and a structural adjustment program designed by a collaboration between the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and USAID. The austerity measures included layoffs, privatizations, and reductions in social spending, resulting in deepened inequalities and the decline of living conditions for many Nicaraguans. Similarly, the economic reforms and structural adjustments in El Salvador prioritized macroeconomic stability instead of addressing poverty and inequality. At the end of the first decade, social cleavages had been exacerbated throughout the country (Löfving, 2007, p. 52). On the other hand, the Guatemalan government committed itself to both economic liberalization and increasing the levels of social welfare. However, the government's socioeconomic agenda was briskly confronted by pressures from the domestic business sector (Ibid., p. 53). Moreover, as economic and political reforms took place, all countries faced a parallel increase in crime rates and social fragmentation.

The lack of political and social inclusion for Central American societies in the peace process was already evident within the first years after the Esquipulas II Treaty was signed, generating serious setbacks for the peacebuilding efforts. Indeed, a report from FLACSO Guatemala, with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, entitled "*Esquipulas, el Camino de la Paz,*" published in 1990, indicated that, in the first years of the peace process, an attempt was made to provide security in each of the Central American states, incorporating greater amounts of weapons, increasing the armed forces, and restricting political action (FLACSO Guatemala, 1990, p. 21). In "*Proceso de paz y contexto internacional*" (Alvaréz Aragón et al., 2013), Luis Alberto Padilla defines this moment as a "regional pacification procedure." Like this, the first phase of the peace process equated peace to the absence of armed conflict (a negative peace); the re-establishment of states' political authority, in

particular, their capacity to monopolize the legitimate means of violence; as well as the introduction of market-based reforms, opening the war-debilitated regional economies to foreign capital and investments.

Kurtenbach (2010) adds to this perspective by concluding that the problems encountered by Central American nations in the transition to an enduring (liberal) peace stem from the systematic failures and deficits of the internationally guided peacebuilding program. The author also points out the emerging concerns in the transitional processes. For instance, when addressing the pacification agenda, she notes that demobilization was quite successful in the first years of the peace process; nonetheless, the reintegration of former combatants was limited due to the lack of opportunities in the formalized peace-time economies emerging within the region. Like this, the massive number of ex-combatants, from formal militaries, guerrilla, and paramilitary groups, who were operating through all the regional territory, would be gradually absorbed by delinquent groups or private security companies, only some of them legally formalized. Since then, the lack of control over the diversity of armed actors operating in the region has become one of the most pervasive problems for public security in Central American countries (Ibid., p. 15).

In such a scenario, compounded by the high number of small arms in circulation, poverty, and marginalization, the everyday experiences of violence facilitated the widespread emergence of youth gangs and delinquent groups. At the same time, the high levels of social violence, mainly affecting the poor and marginalized communities, led to a prioritization of survival and physical security. In the next few years, public security discourses started to emphasize "hard hand" ("*mano dura*") policies in dealing with delinquent groups and organized crime, where youth gangs became the more common scapegoats (ICG, 2017).

Nonetheless, democratization and economic liberalization were not the only processes happening at the regional level. The globalized international system would systematically influence Central American states' efforts to deal with the regionalized armed conflict. Hence, another legacy of this period was the 'transnationalization' process as an economic and demographic phenomenon (Kurtenbach, 2010; Roniger, 2011; Padilla, 2013). In economic terms, transnationalization was an elite-led process in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala during the 1980s and 1990s, when they sought to diversify their economic basis by introducing new agricultural products and investing in the financial sector. As a demographic phenomenon, the push factor for transnationalization was locally engendered, happening over time due to the displacement and migration of millions of Central Americans fleeing their homes: at first, due to the armed conflict, and later, due to the lack of social and economic opportunities, adding to high levels of poverty.

Notably, migration had become a survival strategy for Central American marginalized groups. At first, mobility during the Civil War period had a distinct purpose, and it was both a survival technique and a political resistance technique. The testimony of a young (at the time) Guatemalan member of a resistant community (i.e., one of the

Communities of People in Resistance) builds a vivid picture of the necessity to move after being captured and tortured by the governmental forces, as well as the long-term psychological and physical impacts of those forced into flight.

> If they had managed to kill me, I would not have had my three children. But I lived through it, got my children . . . I come to think about too many things . . . And then I come to think about the fact that, shit, I had to abandon my father and my mother [silence]. And not just that, but . . . I wasn't there when my father died. I wasn't present at the funeral. I come to think about too many things [his voice is about to break into weeping; he speeds up his talking and laughs nervously]. It isn't easy, as I just told you, to live in the mountains, without proper food and housing. However, one has to fight the army. If the EGP hadn't done it, I don't think that in any case, they would have respected the rights, the ones they keep talking about right now, the human rights. (Cited by Löfving, 2007, p. 49)

In this narrative, the necessity to move is clear, and the reasons are multiple: survival, political resistance, and the hope for social change are just the most visible – as every individual history has its singularities. Nonetheless, in this brief reflection, some of the traumas imposed by forced mobility are also visible. The testimony is one of the many possible accounts of displacement and forced migration during the regionalized wars. If taken collectively, traumas such as the inability to grieve and the broken social links associated with the necessity to move may have created a collective flight mechanism for those communities whose survival is at risk[6].

For Central American citizens, migration becomes a response to political and social pressures and contextual changes. Over time, transnational social ties and remittances flows, connecting individuals over and beyond the political borders, would deeply impact any future directions in stabilization, peacebuilding, and development.

In Guatemala, when observing the post-accords transformations after a decade, Löfving (2007, p. 51) addressed the changes in mobility through the notion of "liberal emplacement," in reference to "the lack of opportunities for the poor to position and place themselves in a political structure of influence." The author argues that "the new patterns of movement during the peace process had diminished peoples' space of autonomy and opposition by bringing the army-dominated national society closer, both geographically and socially" (Ibid.). In such contexts, liberal emplacement actually is translated to 'being placed by others' or even 're-displacement' in both geographic and social terms. Individuals and communities were relocated, depending on their positional situation within the peace processes, and community ties were broken as families relocated or separated themselves through land reforms. Displaced people and refugees could then decide to return to their original places, move toward new locations, and even stay where they were. During this period, the uncertainty and insecurity associated with re-displacement added to the resilient militarized social structures, the shrinking political space, and the economic

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6   See Alexander Betts (2013), Survival Migration: Failed Governance and the Crisis of Displacement. Also, for trauma and forced displacement, as well as communities coping mechanisms (or lack it), see Chesmal Siriwardhana & Robert Stewart (2013), Forced migration and mental health: prolonged internal displacement, return migration and resilience, International Health, pp. 19–23.

liberalization reforms, paving an uncertain future for the millions of Central Americans directly affected by the armed conflicts.

The liberal peace framework, established by the Esquipulas Trident, rendered the foundations of international and regional elites' discourse on peacebuilding and development but was not representative of their whole societies, nor did it include the necessities of many. Different perspectives on peace contend with the dominant one. However, their capacity to translate alternative perspectives into discourse and practice was marginalized within the elite-led regional peace process. Rivera Alfaro observes in "Criticism of the peace discourse in the Central American region" that when the regional leaders committed *themselves* to the peace process, they were already setting the basis and limits to whom would guide, promote, and decide on the causes of conflict and alternatives for peace. The scope of the Esquipulas II Trident and the degree of interaction between its vertices were imperatively determined by the governments of that time, compromising and limiting the agreement's democratic character and, thus, making other actors virtually invisible (Rivera Alfaro, 2011, p. 69).

The Role of Migrant-Based Networks in the Peace Processes

Although the regional peace processes were state-led, elitist endeavors, the relevance of non-state actors is remarkable when considering the grassroots movements' contributions and cooperation efforts in finding a solution for displacement. Notable examples appear when focusing on "the emergence of solidarity networks connecting uprooted *campesinos* (peasants) with supporters worldwide, and the mobilization of displaced Salvadorans and Guatemalans to negotiate their own durable solutions" (Bradley, 2014, p. 5). In particular, refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) were applauded for their grassroots triumphs rooted in long histories of resistance and belief systems. The repopulation movement, initiated by Salvadoran refugees in Honduras, is one case in point. The movement faced opposition from governmental and international authorities, fearing the refugee's return to areas under FMLN control. Nevertheless, they were able to negotiate their return rights and started the repopulation of communities such as *El Barillo* and *Tenancingo*, prior warzones occupied by guerrilla groups, with significant support from religious groups, international human rights activists, and private foundations (Miller, 1986).

The Salvadoran success prompted Guatemalan refugees in Mexico to organize themselves, creating the Permanent Commission of Guatemala Refugees (CCPP), a network organized to negotiate their collective return. The CCPP efforts, summarized by the 1992 and 1994 agreements, had various degrees of success. The first one, more progressive, benefited only a small part of the uprooted Guatemalans (5%), which ended up producing feelings of

resentment between IDPs and non-displaced people (Bradley, 2014, pp. 5-6). Nevertheless, their efforts were supported by international sanctuary and accompaniment campaigns, and some of those emerging in North America sought to prevent deportation and support local integration, assisting the undocumented migrants in their 'legalization' efforts (Ibid., p. 6).

In the next decades, the emergence of these solidarity networks and the deepening transnationalization process became part of the adaptive complex systems emerging in Central American post-war societies. Life expectations and insecure domestic environments were again shaping mobility as a necessary endeavor, although not in the hope of political change, but "to make a living" (Löfving, 2007). Indeed, regional development options would increasingly rely on the possibility and effects of mobility to alleviate the social burden of democratizing governments and liberalizing markets.

In fact, the remittances, "the money migrants send home to support their families," rapidly became one of the most important sources of income in foreign exchange for the national accounts (Kurtenbach, 2010, p. 12). In 2016, remittances represented 7,5% of the regional GDP, the largest average in Latin America. In the Northern Central American Triangle (NTCA), remittances accounted for a considerable share of their GDP: El Salvador, 17.1%; Guatemala, 10.4%; and Honduras, 20.2% (ECLAC, 2018, p. 11). Along the way, remittances also helped to create more durable and resilient links within migrant networks, and they explain why migration has, in fact, a co-productive role in the emerging States and societies within the regional liberal peace framework.

Nonetheless, as the implementing partners of the liberal peace process instrumentalized mobility in practice, for 'others' (i.e., those put forcedly on the move), it had a different meaning, and the same could be said for the emerging peace. For some, it meant survival; for others, a hope for a decent life (the basic right to human dignity); and again, to others, it was an opportunity for cheaper labor, extorsion, and further illicit actions (assaults, violations, kidnapping, and people trafficking). In any case, human mobility has created new social systems, linking individuals, public agencies, private enterprises, local grassroots, civil society associations, and national and international non-governmental organizations.

The idea that different perspectives on peace overlap and intertwine in the same space follows the premise that peace is a social construct. It evolves through multiple visions and practices on what peace entails and how it could be achieved. Therefore, it is essential to ask, "What other collective experiences of peace were marginalized or left unattended in the peace processes building on the Esquipulas-II Treaty and its liberal peace framework?"

In this work, we contend that one often marginalized collective experience is forced migration involving migrants and associated social networks. As past experiences have shown (Richmond, 2016), the bottom-up processes of peacebuilding and social transformation, connecting multiple and malleable social actors, appear to impact routine forms of violence the most. Nonetheless, peacebuilding literature has widely neglected the link between peacebuilding and migration governance (with valuable exceptions, for example, Perrinet *et al.*, 2018), as well as the emergent role of non-state, transnational,

and more organic forms of networked agency for peacebuilding and peace development. In order to address this gap, the next chapter seeks to unpack the nexus between liberal peace and migration, highlighting the role of these critical subaltern agencies: the migrant and their support networks.

CHAPTER II

Liberal Peace and Migration: Establishing the Nexus

This chapter will discuss the transformative nexus between peace and forced migration. To this end, forced migration is understood as a form of violence, and the nexus emerges in the continuum of violence during transitions from war to peace systems. For the region, this process officially started in 1987, leading up to the contemporary cultural, structural, and direct forms of violence that impinge upon Central Americans' migration experience today. By exploring the dynamic nexus between liberal peace and migration, we stress the importance of alternative forms of agency for local peacebuilding, such as migrants-based networks and organizations.

Peace involves a complex process of social transformation. Liberal peace, in turn, indicates a distinct – and often externally imposed – project for building stable and sustainable peace. As a project and a process, liberal peace entails a broad and complex social engineering exercise (Braga, 2017; Paris, 2004). Conversely, migration is a cross-cutting issue in the transition from war to peace and beyond; nevertheless, the nexus between liberal peace and migration is pervasive in post-conflict settings. To understand Central America's current migration processes, one must first address this transformative nexus. The testimonial of the indigenous feminist Lorena Cabnal, from Guatemala, greatly contributes to understanding the issue.

> It seems to me that there is an intention and a political intention to mobilize bodies in an abrupt, violent way, and it is a result of a structural historical effect. I believe that nobody moves from a significant territory while that territory provides them with everything necessary for life. The bodies are mobilized as an effect of the patriarchal system, the colonial system, capitalism, and its brutal neoliberal phase on bodies and territories. Therefore, I believe that talking about immigrant bodies is an element of community feminism that invites us to reflect on this development and on the historical context of violence. And then . . . leads to understanding immigration as a form of violence against the bodies (Cabnal, *Network for Ancestral Healers of Community Feminism*, online source, interview transcript).

In Cabnal words, the nexus is firmly established: migration entails a form of violence enacted over, and at the same time, the social and political bodies are being redefined in their transitions from war to peace. What sort of peace does she see emerging? A (neo) liberal one, perhaps.

Liberal peace, though, is not a consensual term, nor does it point to an ideal type of peace. On the contrary, the definition emerges as a critique of what today, indiscriminately, is

defined as "peace" and "no peace," like overlaying lines that separate the modern and liberal world from everything else (Jabri, 2010). Liberal peace entails a project and a technology of governmentalization, in which it is assumed that "a benign order will emerge at the end when power is overcome and directed to the ends of a 'good' society, state, or international order, often pointing to the active role of transnational networks, institutions, the social contract, civil society, and social activism" (Richmond, 2016).

Nevertheless, the enduring power asymmetries among the actors participating in peace processes have resulted in variable configurations and outcomes for the emergent social order. Frequently, peace processes are run by traditional or rising elites, simultaneously empowered during the conflict at the state and international levels. They tend to focus on the state and its governing institutions (state-building). The pursued outcome is the liberal democratic (or, at least, functional) state (Braga, 2017).

For Jabri (2010), the liberal peace project is included within a modernization discourse through which the guiding lines of a democratic and market-oriented development are established for the constitution of liberal societies. As a governmentalization technology, liberal peace is defined in terms of governance and institutional development, governing (or shaping) populations and territories considered non-liberal to recreate the 'political' following a liberal framework. In practice, liberal peace is perceived as the international grand strategy to expand the borders of the modern world to postcolonial states.

This conception, based on the theory of democratic peace (see Russet & Oneal, 2001), entails a political system made up of sovereign states, constituted as liberal democracies, in which the boundaries between state and society, public and private, formal and informal, legal and illegal, legitimate and illegitimate, are all clearly defined, at least, in theory. These dichotomic lines also divide the practices and narratives contributing to peace from those that should be considered potentially conflictive or violent. The ensuing systemic changes profoundly alter the societies' power structures.

At the same time, the developing changes also establish the conditions of agency (exercise of power) within the new social order, indicating those who would have or not have the capacity to exercise it. Some have their power of agency recognized, while others do not. Moreover, the marginalized groups will be structurally divided into those who need assistance to be included in the modernization project (that is, the victims); those who, for the success of the project, must be eliminated or displaced (hence the bad, the vile, the spoilers); and those who do not figure anywhere, the marginalized majority.

As Oliver Richmond (2016) traces the peace history through world societies, the author observes that "peace in history has more often than not been formed within societies and by their cooperation over nonviolent approaches in dealing with political problems, mostly related to the fair distribution of resources" (Richmond, 2016, pp. 3-4). However, when overseeing contemporary peace processes, Richmond concludes that the states and the international society systematically marginalize peace movements and activities at the local and social levels. As such, a far-reaching paradox is observed, for it is at the local level, in everyday contexts, the root causes of violent conflicts

and the visceral effects of direct, structural, and cultural forms of violence are felt (Richmond, 2016; Galtung, 1969, 1990).

At no other social system level peace and violence are experienced as deeply as in the everyday context. However, in complex adaptive social systems, the 'everyday' also presents the emergence of critical forms of agency, such as new civil society actors, peace movements and infrastructures, social activism, and other forms of networked social organization. Across the world, these actors have been taking action, demanding more responsive, inclusive, and transparent states and peace processes. To access these critical forms of agency, the concept of peace formation, proposed by Oliver Richmond (2016), seeks to analyze the process through which the multiple levels where peace is discussed, practiced, overlapped, and intertwine as the local becomes a partial formulation of the national and global levels, and vice-versa.

> [P]eace formation stems from a local agency, networks, and forms of mobilization for legitimate and progressive peace agreements. It draws on everyday, localized understandings of positionality vis-à-vis politics, justice, reconciliation, and is scaled up – at least theoretically – towards the state and the international order. . . . Peace formation can thus be seen as a form of subaltern agency or power... a subaltern and critical form of agency that seeks to engage with direct, structural, or governmental power, which sustains conflict or injustice and structural violence, with varying degrees of success and failure. (Richmond 2016, p. 5)

As sociopolitical systems transition from violent conflict towards an imagined form of peace, new subjects are tied together, and subjectivities are developed. Borders and boundaries are reenacted in the production of a new order, where subalternity and agency are also redefined. In these sites, the notion of borders and boundaries is instrumentalized in the new government and social control technologies. The border determines the external frontier of the emerging political system, and the boundaries relate to the system's internal social categorizations (Fassin, 2011). Hence, the new borders and boundaries determine the requirements for citizenship and representation, recognizing some living experiences and marginalizing others. Borders entail geographic sites and the sited encounter of different political and social systems, where distinct ways of living, producing, and reproducing life overlap and intertwine. They are spaces of connection and conflict, where everyday interactions converge in unique modes of living and experiencing peace and violence (Das & Poole, 2004).

The current migration 'crisis' is enacted in this liminal reality of Central America's post-war states and transitional societies, emerging in the margins of overlapping and frictional systems. The protracted nature of the regional armed conflicts profoundly changed the conflicting societies' social structures. During the civil wars, political and social violence were endemic, and the resulting insecurity, uncertainty, and instability led to prolonged experiences of displacement. Similar experiences are traced in every internal armed conflict (Krause, 2012), where the physical and psychological impacts of flight and migration will produce long-term consequences, affecting displaced people and refugees in different ways, considering their age, gender, socioeconomic status, as well as individual personalities and social ties.

However, why is human mobility nowadays presented as a humanitarian crisis and not an answer to it? Where does the experience of violence begin? Where does it end? How does forced migration fit into this equation?

Peace Formation and Forced Migration

Peace formation allows us to address the presence of critical and subaltern forms of agency within transitions from war/armed conflict to (liberal) peace (Richmond, 2016). Moreover, it presents the 'emergent' qualities of these critical agencies within a transformative social process by analytically isolating 'the political' (legitimatized and public) of those experiences and social practices considered 'non-political' (non-legitimatized and non-public). In such processes, legitimacy entails some form of collective authorization (Johnson, 2006), which is possible through the exercise of authority and public discourse. Thus, in peace processes, the social process of (re)creating the political establishes at once those who may operate within it and excludes all that cannot claim some degree of authorization.

Over time, political structures become more institutionalized and less fluid, pushing, pressuring, and adapting to the changing dynamics (social, economic, cultural, or political). It is a time when the possibilities of existence are being redefined and repositioned. Power dynamics are at play; some forms of existence will prevail, while others will not. Among those excluded or marginalized but also actively engaged in these bordering dynamics, we find the irregular migrant or even the undocumented migrant. Here, however, the identification of irregularity, impressed upon their marginalized, racialized, and, often, sexualized bodies, also imposes on the migrant body the condition of 'illegality.' Non-state-sanctioned human mobility becomes perceived and pursued as criminal, thus excluding a priori from any legal basis of protection.

The notion of illegal immigration violates ex-post the fundamental rights of people on the move by excluding them from the very possibility of seeking protection when they need it the most. The notion of 'forced migration' may not apply to all people on the move, but in the contemporary mixed flows, many experiences will be identified as such. According to the International Organization on Migration (IOM), forced migration occurs when a migratory movement involves force, compulsion, or coercion, even if there are multiple drivers (IOM, 2019).

Forced migration occurs both during war and peace times, and although their drivers may differ, they emerge in response to both the changing dynamics of social, economic, and political orders, as well as hazards and natural disasters associated with climate change. Therefore, to understand the causal relationship between liberal peace and forced migration, it is important to identify (1) their drivers and (2) the migrants' positionality vis

a vis other actors and processes within the regional transitional dynamics for sustainable peace. As such, this work presents a more descriptive analysis of the Central American migration flows towards the North, seeking to map the actors and dynamics that take part in the complex social networks created along the path.

The Public and Hidden Transcripts of Liberal Peace

A potential method for approaching the nexus between liberal peace and forced migration and positioning the forced migrant within the whole transitional process was advanced by James Scott (1990) when presenting the notions of public and hidden transcripts. The author's methodological approach to ethnographic inquiry on different modes of existence provides an analytical guide to diverse forms of social experience.

James Scott identifies the 'transcript' as the complete record of social interactions imbued by power dynamics, which involves not only acts of speech but also non-speech, such as gestures and expressions. In turn, the public transcript comprehends a way of describing "the overt interactions between subordinates and those who dominate" (Scott, 1990, p. 2). However, as the author will argue, the public (open) interactions will never tell the whole story. Such interactions represent open acting, where the actors behave as expected. Typically, public transcripts will support the dominant (or hegemonic) worldview. In contemporary peace processes, for example, the public transcript would relate to the open practice and narratives of liberal peace, including those of migration, refugee, and asylum rights. However, hidden from the public view, actors (dominant and subordinate) can behave quite differently. Hidden transcripts are "off-stage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or misrepresent what appears in the public transcript" (Scott, 1990, pp. 4-5). Although public transcripts express formal power relations, the hidden transcripts equally affect existing power relations, supporting, strengthening, weakening, or, when collectively organized, presenting alternatives for the performance of new public transcripts.

Similar understandings are to be found in complexity studies. Changes in complex social systems do not materialize in a vacuum; they are the result of small, unobserved changes that occur over time. Hence, the hidden transcripts are seen as a part of the whole collective experience, but they encompass those experiences that are negated or problematized within the emerging political order. For example, the experience of 'forced' migration in the contemporary Central American context, in which the individual components are presented as irregular migrants or even illegal immigrants. In this case, the migrant is inscribed in the public transcript of the emerging liberal order as 'irregular,' while the experience of 'being forced' remains hidden.

Forced migration indicates that violence is applied in any stage of the migratory path: before departure, during transit, or at their final destination. Therefore, when addressing this form of human experience within the scripted power dynamics (public and hidden transcripts), what is hidden from the public transcript is the condition of violence, which

is also constitutive of the whole. However, within the last decade or so, these hidden transcripts and their diverse forms of agency have upsurged in the public transcript.

As the ethnographic account presented in the last chapter of this essay seeks to address, the crisis in which the Central American Migrant Caravans are publicly inscribed represents an acute tension within the emerging order and an opportunity for the hidden transcripts to erupt in the public space. It reveals both the experience of violence and the emergent agencies which, although hidden from the public transcript, have influenced the whole process in many forms: by resisting the imposed changes or their inscribed wholes within the process or by stimulating the societies' emerging capacities of adaptation to the new political order, ameliorating its negative effects.

As it will be further argued, the public transcript favors representations of liberal peace and its social resilience. In turn, the hidden transcripts reveal the emergent possibilities for social change, which remain ever possible and may (or may not) emerge as a crisis – or rupture – in the developing liberal order. However, the lack of comprehension of the interdependencies between conflict, migration, and peace is evident in the design of peace processes, migration governance structures, and normative frames. The next part of this essay presents this author's effort in engaging and contributing to the abovementioned debate.

Critical Agencies in the Peace-Migration Nexus

In January 2020, as another massive migrant Caravan left San Pedro Sula, Honduras, the local and international newspapers presented the situation as a migratory crisis with dramatic and urgent undertones (Meza, 2020). Since 2018, these Central American caravans have become a pronounced feature in regional security governance, while borders were increasingly fortified and militarized, and migrant bodies (regular or not) criminalized and sexualized. Nevertheless, in complex social systems, a crisis may also entail a distinct opportunity for exploring systemic emergencies (Coning, 2016), considering the possible responses undertaken by all involved parties, state and non-state.

Moreover, the interdependencies between migration and peacebuilding become particularly relevant when embedded in a transitional process from war to peace. As such, this essay sought support for the concept of peace formation (Richmond, 2016) by taking note of the emergence of critical (subaltern) forms of agency and, thus, adding new variables to the traditional schemes of migration governance. In particular, we focus on the role of migrant networks and organizations in the transformative praxis of peace.

Usually, in the literature of peace studies, irregular migration is presented as a product of 'force' (i.e., violent interactions) or of 'life choices,' albeit under a set of limited possibilities provided by contextual, structural, and normative changes. One of which is survival. This

literature recognizes different degrees of agency to irregular/forced migrants, generally conceived along three lines. First or foremost, as 'victims,' deprived of human rights and relegated to bare life, informed by the political thinking of Giorgio Agamben (1998, 2005). Based on his works, the irregular migrant embodies a particular 'other' that can be killed but not sacrificed or even that can be killed with impunity. However, under victimization subjectivities, it becomes doubtful if one should advocate her/his emancipation within the same system that has transformed them into victims. A second line of thought understands the irregular migrant as an emerging political subject, in line with the thinking of Hanna Arendt on 'the right to have rights,' which seeks to transform the system of laws in which they are deprived of rights (Arendt, 1973; Ellermann, 2009; Miggiano, 2009).

Lastly, not as consensual as the first two and embedded in neoliberal subjectivities, irregular migrants are presented as 'free agents' in avoiding the State(s) and choosing migration as an alternative coping mechanism. Although their degree of choice may be questionable, this third lens is on par with the form of mobility that James Scott (1990) called "immigration that evades the state" when addressing undocumented migrants. For Scott (1990), this is also part of the plurality of existence techniques that can be defined as irregular migration. In turn, Luca Miggiano (2009) calls attention to the precarity of the "undocumented" existence, which sustains neoliberal practices and structures, attracting massive flows for cheap labor exploitation in licit and illicit markets and, thus, exposing many individuals to increased vulnerabilities and favoring human rights violations.

Notwithstanding the great contribution to migration scholarly of these three lines of thought, identifying migrants on any of these lines would be similar to essentializing irregular or forced migration by reducing their experience to a singular line of causation and effect. Notably, current 'mixed flows' have made the possibility of identifying one or the other particularly difficult. A better definition could be found in the work of Alexander Betts when he presents the notion of "survival migration." Survival migrants are "people who are outside their country of origin because of an existential threat for which they have no access to a domestic remedy or resolution – whether as a result of persecution, conflict or environmental degradation, for example" (Betts, 2013, p. 5).

Thus, the picture presented here is more complex. Indeed, violence and complexity (De Coning, 2016, 2018; Jessop, 1999) are interrelated elements when addressing migration as a peacebuilding strategy or coping mechanism. For instance, Perrinet *et al.* (2018) argue that "if migration is not a choice for marginalized youth, joining a vigilante group might be an alternative response." When migration becomes too restricted, as when certain forms of mobility are securitized, the enfolding situations could affect the individual's survival possibilities, enhancing feelings of insecurity and frustration and limiting the scope of choices for alternative responses. Migration is not only a response to violence-induced events but also an alternative strategy for more organic peacebuilding and development, an opportunity for reducing human insecurity and structural violence, particularly when the nation-states do not offer more adequate responses. In this last approach, migration materializes a bottom-up response and coping mechanism to a state or elite-led peacebuilding process.

As a bottom-up peacebuilding strategy, migration is usually engendered at the local level, based on societies' self-organizing capacities to reduce or mitigate violence in any form and achieve a sustainable form of peace (De Coning, 2016; Paffenholz, 2009). These emerging capacities provide distinct forms of social organization, which may or may not operate through social networks and the developing peace infrastructures. In fact, it is within the emergent peace infrastructures that we identified migrant networks and organizations.

Migrants' networks comprehend "complex ties of interpersonal relationships that connect migrants, ex-migrants and non-migrants in the areas of origin and destination, through family ties, friendship and conterraneity" (Massey, 1988, p. 396). These networks may link together the migrants and their relatives, who remain in the country of origin, connected through communication channels, as well as remittances, to those at the destination country or along their path. Migrant-based organizations, in turn, include those who seek and organize themselves to support migrants and reduce the risks of violence in the migration process, starting from the country of origin to those of transit and, later, of destination. Migrants-based organizations will create protection systems that may involve state and non-state agencies operating at various levels of authority, including rights-based networks formed by governmental and non-governmental agencies, such as advocacy, solidarity, and religious communities, journalists, academics, humanitarians, public defenders, and state security personnel. In Central America, however, such protection systems have mostly been comprised of non-governmental and civil society organizations operating in local, national, and transnational structures.

Migrants-based organizations interact with migrants networks, establishing, over time, what Charles Tilly (2007) has identified as a form of "thrust network" that involves "ramified interpersonal connections, consisting mainly of strong ties, within which people set-valued, consequential, long-term resources and enterprises at risk to the malfeasance, mistakes, or failures of others" (2007, p.7). For the author, over history, "trust networks have performed an enormous range of political, economic, and spiritual work for human beings, especially those human beings who could not rely on governments to provide them with sustaining services" (Ibid., p.5).

Although these networks have been formed by a varied set of subjects, such as kinship relations, mutual aid societies, youth groups, religious communities, political conspiracies, or patron-client chains, they have become increasingly relevant in migration streams. Migrants thrust networks help to reduce the violence embedded in the migration process, also reducing the costs of undertaking the migratory path by (1) reinforcing solidarity ties, (2) binding the members to long-term rights and obligations, and (3) creating a sense of community (a 'we-feeling'), producing and reproducing transnational ties and communication flows, which mitigates uncertainty and insecurity. Thrust networks entail "sites of social insurance and social control," establishing boundaries, rights, and obligations (Tilly, 2007, p. 5). In particular, migrant networks tend to become more stable as remittance flows reinforce commitments among all participants (Ibid.). However, migrant networks and their protection systems do not stand alone in complex social systems; they operate in diverse settings, where state and non-state actors are part of the

system's dynamics.

Interacting in the same context, sometimes connected to both forms of agency, other forms of networked actions become relevant, such as smuggling and illicit trafficking networks (of people, drugs, guns, and other goods), with their ambiguous intersection with formal and informal markets, licit and illicit ties. In Central America, as elsewhere, smuggling networks establish links with larger criminal organizations, mostly narcotrafficking groups or cartels, with ostensive control over territories, that demand payment for the right of 'safe passage' for migrants. Non-payment, on the other hand, may be met with severe consequences, such as the massacre of a group of migrants whose smuggler did not pay the necessary fee.[7]

In addition, as expressed in the FATF (2022) report entitled: "Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing Risks Arising from Migrant Smuggling," smuggling networks may also engage in other forms of illicit action.

> There are cases observed of migrant smugglers taking opportunities to commit other crimes not necessarily implied by but directly related to migrant smugglings, such as forgery, corruption of border agencies and other public agencies to help facilitate travel and even administration of addictive drugs to exploit and control their victims. These other crimes include drug trafficking, theft, harassment, sexual abuse, blackmail, human trafficking, robbery, murder, smuggling of illegal goods, and labour exploitation. The transnational nature of this crime also allows migrant smugglers to transport drugs and firearms and smuggle goods. (FATF 2022)

The proliferation of these networks increases the potential vulnerabilities of people on the move and their families, as kidnappings, extorsions, and sexual and labor exploitation become part of the process. Over time, as border policies became more restrictive, migrant networks interconnected with trafficking organizations, putting thousands of interconnected individuals at risk. In turn, migrants-based organizations have responded by creating new support structures, building multiple shelters and 'safe houses' along the way to welcome those in need, and seeking state security to support them when necessary.

Migrant thrust networks represent essential forms of collective agency in migration governance and, consequently, for peace formation. In Central America, from the civil wars period to the present day, migrants' thrust networks have helped to ameliorate the

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7   In some of the interviews, participants associated the known massacres of migrants in Guatemala and Mexican borders with the actions of organized crime who controlled the regions where these crimes took place. As the Hope Border Foundation denounces, in a brief report published on May 23, 2018: "Mexico's increasing role in the deterrence and containment of migrants in transit towards the U.S. has been accompanied by large scale abuses of their rights through tens of thousands of forced disappearances ('kidnappings')4 and rampant sexual abuse and rape affecting between 60 and 80% of migrant women.5 Also significant is the targeted killing of migrants in contexts such as the San Fernando (Tamaulipas) massacre, which claimed 72 victims from 6 countries in August 2016; the mass graves discovered there in April 2011 with another 193 victims; as well as the Cadereyta (Nuevo León) massacre with 49 victims in May 2017. Together, these actions may amount to 'crimes against humanity' within the framework of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court."

violent conditions of their existence: they may provide a 'flight' opportunity to those desiring to escape the everyday expressions of armed violence as well as a platform for advocating their 'safe return;' or they may help to address structural inequalities, through remittances flows and solidarity movements. Nevertheless, they remain largely marginalized in actions and debates on migration governance during transitions from war to peace, where issues of return and resettlement are most important. The same is true for those who may claim a legitimate form of mobility, be they returnees, internally displaced, settlers, re-settlers, asylum seekers, refugees, seasonal economic migrants, or international workers and students.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines the irregular migrant as a person who moves or has crossed an international border and is not authorized to enter or remain in a state under the law of that state and the international agreements to which that state is a party (OIM, 2018, 2003). Authorization, in turn, assumes the legibility of the state and, in practice, involves technologies of bordering and border control (Sassen, 2015). The migrant body becomes the site where new technologies of social control are enacted and where the experience of migration is felt as legal or illegal, peaceful or violent.

In recent decades, state agents have tended to portray migration as a security problem (Hammerstadt, 2014) involving the trafficking of people and goods, as well as an increased 'burden' for the institutionalized state protection systems (border control). In these subjectivation processes, a dual reality is imposed over the forced migrant: their prescriptive 'irregularity' and their 'racialization.' Both phenomena have engendered new forms of subjectivity enacted in social and political institutions, their routine procedures, and their actions. The migrant population is taken as the object of security policies, and their subjugation and subjectivation as the processual outcome. Inscribed within the security-migration nexus, the underlying governmentality of the liberal peace transcript has increasingly relied on the state's political economy and policing technologies (Fassin, 2011). In response, the migrant populations have adapted and adopted alternative ways of organizing themselves for survival, security, and development.

To summarize the problem, liberal peace does not only entail the grand strategy of the international community, regional and national elites in order to produce new and peaceful social orders with their democratic, market-oriented, and law-abiding citizens. The new technologies of governmentalization impose multiple technologies of subjectivation and social control in which the requirements for inclusion and citizenship are reestablished, and new forms of exclusion are developed as a processual outcome. However, particularly when related to migration governance, the top-down processes encounter dynamic and complex societies structured within very conflictive and violent periods and, thus, also apt to resist, adapt, or transform their environment in the search for survival. At the same time, critical forms of agency for peacebuilding and development emerge within this bottom-up process of social transformation, redefining the experience of 'peace' in a more organic way.

Different perspectives on violence and peace interact and produce diverse outcomes in peace formation processes. Although peace remains elusive in Central American countries' post-civil war period, it is enacted within the public and liberal transcript, underlined by entrenched structures of violence that remain ever present in the margins of the post-war political systems, hidden but also 'emergent.' In order to present a clearer picture of this process, the final chapter seeks to unpack the nexus between liberal peace and migration in the contemporary migration flows, untangling their public and hidden transcripts by relying on fieldwork observations and interviews conducted between January and February 2020 in Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico; and three years later, addressing the post-pandemic context in the border between Guatemala and Mexico.

CHAPTER III

Unpacking the Nexus: A Biographical Account

In the Central American societies devastated by armed conflicts, the social fabric was shattered. The population's vast majority was nothing more than an observer of the (liberal) 'peace' they saw emerging. In particular, the younger generations, growing in turbulent times of flourishing war economies. Their inclusion became a 'complex issue' in the following years, given the general impoverishment of these post-traumatic societies, accompanied by accelerated movements of urbanization and modernization without adequate planning. A study conducted with 2,400 Central Americans between March and February 2019 reveals that young people, ranging from 18 to 29, are more likely to migrate (1/3 of the consulted youths manifested the wish to migrate). Among the drivers for migration, economic issues were the most cited, including unemployment, household earnings, and a pessimistic outlook on life possibilities, followed and closely connected with experiences of victimization (i.e., exposure to homicide and other crimes that breed feelings of insecurity, including extortion, robbery, bribery, and violence against women) (Creative, 2019, p. 6). The same study concluded that, although transnational ties were not as mentioned as the first two, they constitute "an important pull factor in the migration equation," as nearly 2/3 of the participants had relatives leaving abroad. Over 20% of households' income across the region reportedly came from remittances (Ibid., p. 8).

The growing social inequality encouraged the rise of informal economies and parallel markets. In the Central American post-war states, especially in the so-called 'Northern Triangle' (Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala), in which the structures of violence have not been fully transformed, peace arises behind walls and protected places, maintained by the predominant use of organized armed force, belonging to the State or authorized by it. However, where states' authority does not reach, other forms of governance emerge. As argued in Braga and Villa (2022), the emergence of new forms of agency and governance dynamics in marginalized spaces should be further analyzed when referring to migration governance as an integral part of peace formation processes in Central America. However, in addressing contemporary migratory movements, through the lens of peace formation (Richmond, 2012, 2016), the focus is on the two critical and fundamental forms of agency emerging in these contexts: migrants networks and migrants-based organizations, and their capacities to deal with the pervasive forms of violence in the post-war period through the formation of thrust networks.

The next part of this section was produced through a first-hand, biographical account as a passing observer of the first Central American Caravan to leave San Pedro Sula in 2020.

Based on the fieldwork conducted in Central America and Mexico between January and February 2020, the experience of the many subjects involved in the governance of Central American migration is narrated through the foreign eye of an observer. The text below seeks to capture the observer's estrangement in her encounter with different subjects, i.e., cultural, political, and social 'others' (from herself), and her entanglement with them. As such, this reflexive text also embraces the degrees to which 'the other' is embodied by the observer, who is embedded in the same context as a migrant and in her connection to forced migration, migrants' networks, and their protection systems.

Migration entails a form of being and inhabiting the social world. When addressing the peace-migration nexus, many layers and levels of political and social action for peacemaking, peacebuilding, and peace development overlap and intertwine in systems of peace formation. Elsewhere, "peace formation" is presented as a system of security governance (Braga & Villa, 2021); here an emergent part of this system is addressed: migration governance. Like this, it is also possible to locate migrant networks and organizations and their transnationally engendered thrust networks as subaltern forms of agency, deeply connected to the process of peace formation in Central America. Nevertheless, one question remains: How do we start to unpack something so intertwined?

Among the many possible answers to this question, the ethnographic approach proposed by James Scott (1990) seemed the most attractive choice. The idea here is to understand first how peace and conflict are scripted within the contemporary dynamics of migration in the regional space. To do so, two sets of questions were part of a semi-structured questionnaire applied to key individual interviews (KII) during the fieldwork in Central America:

1.   What forms of conflict and violence are present? Who enacts them?

2.   How they are addressed, and who deals with them?

Fieldwork occurred between January 4 and February 11, 2020, and included brief visits to Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico. The data collected during this first incursion to Central America was extracted from 18 semi-structured interviews and fieldwork registries, local and regional newspapers, media outlets, and social media releases. Among those interviewed are migrants, local civil societies and international non-governmental organizations, religious communities, public defenders, police officers, state bureaucracy, and academics. The information from this first fieldwork has been verified and updated by more recent incursions to the border areas between Mexico and the United States, from November 12 to 19, 2022, and the borderlands of Guatemala and Mexico, between January 23 to February 10, 2023.

In this account, the public and hidden transcripts, connected to Scott's form of ethnographic inquiry, emerge in an auto-ethnographic account of the fieldwork mission through Central America, describing the author's interaction with a variety of actors, whose work and experience in this setting contributes to a vision of plurality and diversity in the conceptions of peace within the region.

The public transcript is the prominent setting, visible in the official discourse of state agents and the author's interactions with border personnel, state bureaucracy, and non-governmental organizations. The public transcript also shows the setting in which forced migration is experienced as "illicit" (blurring the lines between irregular and illegal). On the other hand, the hidden transcripts are revealed in the migration experience (as the author accompanies a Central American Caravan's path up north, connecting with religious communities, journalists, academics, local non-governmental organizations, and civil society) and the migrants themselves. In the hidden transcript, forced migration materializes as a form of violence.

Nevertheless, the actual understanding of the dynamics this author tried to analyze and unwittingly became a part of came as a reflexive effort months later, perhaps even a year, when this paper began to be written. Thus, the present section will explore this later analytical process, where fieldwork registries are recounted and mediated by personal accounts of how the author made sense of her many encounters in the field. The attribution of meaning to each event ('encounter') is presented in a mediated dialogue between the author ('myself') and the interviewees, who, as mentioned before, include migrants, non-governmental organizations, academics, journalists, and state and religious authorities. These are positioned in a complex and dynamic system where security governance, migration, and local peacebuilding efforts interconnect.

Moreover, by addressing the public and hidden transcripts and, thus, providing an account of the social and political entanglement of emerging and declining structures, as well as new and older forms of agency, the experience of migration is identified within the developing liberal peace. Liberal peace, the hegemonic view, is encrypted in the public transcript; simultaneously, the experience of 'mobility' as 'violence' (or a violent process) is one of the many hidden transcripts operating through it.

Like this, the last chapter dives deeper into the essay's fundamental purpose, unpacking the liberal peace-migration nexus in transitional societies through an observational and participatory account. The following sections aim to localize both forms of critical agencies explored in the second chapter (migrant networks and migrant-based organizations) for the ongoing process of social transformation. A scenario in which peace structures are emergent, but prior violence and conflict structures were not profoundly changed.

Deciding on the Road

The decision to take the Central American route was an impulse in which two forces were operative: first, the scientific curiosity with the migrant subject, the 'other' in so many accounts of Central American societies and, if Spivak is right, the new subaltern subject of our times (Yamato, 2021); the second, was a personal challenge, based on the idea

that only 'experiencing it' could make possible to understand (albeit, screeching only the surface) what motivates the forced migrants to risk everything on a dangerous journey. Looking back, I thought of myself just as a researcher, doing 'fieldwork,' much as a doctor goes about their clinical practices. Sometimes, I also considered myself a 'tourist' visiting Central America's tropical and resource-rich landscapes.

In any case, in retrospect, the preconception that I was from a foreign and not Central American country (i.e., Brazil) and spoke a foreign language (Portuguese and not Spanish) made it possible that I would imagine myself as fundamentally different from the subjects I sought to study. Hence, I naively started the journey described below in search of these critical subjects for building peace in the region. Along the way, however, many of my pre-informed notions would change, including the perceptions of myself and others in which I had made myself comfortable.

Ultimately, I realized that I was not so different from 'them.' In reality, I was positioned in the same condition of 'being' that other migrants were being forced to represent. From the moment I left the bus terminal in San José, Costa Rica, on January 4, 2020, to the day I arrived at the Mexican border with the United States on February 6, 2020, I was also embodying the immigrant under suspicion, living on the liminal reality between legality and illegality. 'We' were all forced into that uncomfortable position by securitized migratory governance systems, where multiple actors interacted: the state bureaucratic and security apparatus, civil societies, international organizations, non-state armed actors, organized crime, and the regional population.

The Nicaragua Border: The First Crossing

From San José, Costa Rica, to the first border with Nicaragua, it would take us around four hours. The views had begun to change up north, with more open fields and blander colors than the exuberant nature down south. We had left in the first hours of the day and arrived at the border when the sun was high in the sky. As planned, all border crossings would happen during the day, as we were advised to never cross them during the night: 'for our safety.'

Why is this important? Well, from the presence of criminal actors to the corruption of border officials, the risks of extorsion, assault, kidnappings, and violation were higher during the night. As I discovered then, we would always have to leave the bus on one side of the border and cross it by foot to arrive at the next migratory post. Crossings like this are not unusual but were something new to me. As we went down the bus, my first impression was more of a feeling of 'estrangement' as I heard the driver telling us what to do: he would be waiting for us on the other side.

At the crossing, we needed to pay a tariff to enter the country (which you could pay online), and, of course, we had not done it beforehand. It was cheap, but still a hassle as we lined up to pay the required value (still in Costa Rica). Next, we moved – on foot – to the Nicaragua border control center, and we would enter the bus again from there. At this point, my estrangement with this form of border-crossing only produced the thought that it would be quite troublesome to move from one border to the next, on foot, in the hot Central American weather, during all planned crossings until the Mexican border.

The second impression, however, is implicitly related to our diverse dispositions concerning that particular border. There were open fields behind us and more upfront. Security was marginal, but both sides seemed well organized to receive the passing tourists, pendular workers, and, of course, the crossing immigrants. In my case, I felt 'uneasy' as I was told of Nicaragua's unstable political environment, and the feeling rapidly increased when we arrived at the Nicaraguan border center, where almost all of our bus fellows could proceed to where the bus stood waiting. My Mexican friend and I did not. The colleague from Costa Rica stayed where she was, also looking quite uneasy as the border security officers called us.

The uneasiness we felt was partly dissolved when we were led to a booth and made to stand with other fellows to be interviewed by an officer behind a glass window. My friend, also a lawyer and a journalist, stood behind me. When my turn arrived, I was able to understand the problem. I had not filled out the Nicaraguan migration form, which was supposed to be completed online at least seven days before entering the country. A policy that was recently implemented, I was told.[8] Neither had my friend. As this was my first time visiting the country, I received simple questions: 'Where are you going?' 'Where are you staying?' 'For how long?' 'What is the purpose of this trip?' These were just some routine questions answered quite simply with the truth.

However, when it was time for my friend to be interviewed, the questions became more specific. She had already visited the country once quite recently and was also a journalist! Thus, the border officers also asked her about her profession. Listening, they probably knew quite a bit about her, or, at least, they wanted to know. Nevertheless, they declared us free to go after our brief answers on the inquired topics.

Nicaragua was a distinct kind of ordeal, and I will only say this: the marks of ongoing political tensions that exploded in April 2018 were everywhere in the first months of 2020. In Managua, the beautiful city lacked animation and ordeal. Here and there, we saw the *turbas* of young men dressed in dark clothes and sitting in open pick-ups, bearing their arms for all to see. The feeling of unease persisted throughout the journey, and it was with a small amount of relief that we left Nicaraguan soil. Two were the most prominent conflict issues presented in our conversations with Nicaraguan academics and activists:

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8   The events described here happened in January 2020. Since then, controls have become even stricter, and governmental permission is required to enter the country before arriving at the country's border. In April 2023, I sought to cross Nicaragua's border again in transit to Costa Rica and did not receive the government's permission.

i) land disputes and natural resource exploitations and ii) the political and civil resistance against the increasingly authoritarian regime. However, to truly understand the current context, both issues cannot be fully explained apart from the other. As an academic professor would tell us when explaining the primary forms of conflict in the region:

> This has been a source of conflict and competition for resources. Another dramatically conflictive zone has been the zone of reserve and protected areas, which are indigenous territories and ancestral community lands. I can mention El Maíz, for example, it has been a historical zone of conflict, in the southern central zone of Nicaragua. And also the North Caribbean area, which is a very important reserve. There has been a process of colonization and land trafficking. There has been a process, let's say, of expansive agriculture. There is a serious problem there, that is, there is a problem of conflict with the government, where there is complicity from the authorities. In a certain way, there is, let's say, apparently, a commitment of the State to the brigade. The Ecological Brigade has just arrived. But it is known that there is a whole network driven by settlers who are apparently peasants, destroying forests and mountains, and they are surrounding and uprooting pastures. And then it passes into other hands. And there is a whole process. That has been going on for years and they are groups armed with war rifles. (KII with Nicaraguan academic, January, 2020)

Although human rights and indigenous organizations have sparsely documented the situation, violent deaths in rural areas continue to increase. In 2021, Nicaragua was considered the most perilous country for environmental activists (ACAPS, 2023). Associated with this violent context and ongoing political tensions involving government persecution and the expulsion of many human rights and humanitarian organizations from that country, in 2020, around 100,000 Nicaraguans fled the country. By 2022, this number had doubled, particularly in the run-up and following the November 2021 elections, when the Ortega-Murillo regime started a crackdown on dissidents and political opposition parties. Nicaraguan emigrants mostly fled to Costa Rica (around 200,000) due to the country's proximity and political and economic stability (Ripley III, 2023). By the end of 2022, when I returned to Costa Rica (with the decline of the COVID-19 pandemic), I would meet with many of them in my daily activities, and from those I had known in Nicaragua, most had already left the country.

Back in January 2020, four days after crossing the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, we were on the road to Honduras.

SAN PEDRO SULA, HONDURAS: THE CARAVAN'S STARTING POINT

From Nicaragua to the Honduran border, it took us four hours. We arrived early again, following the same crossing pattern: we would leave the bus on one side of the border,

entering again on the other, after passing through customs and immigration on both sides.

Food for thought: it is illegal to transfer native animals from one side of the border to the next; signs at every stop indicate as much (as it may constitute wildlife trafficking and forest crimes[9]). It was bizarre that I only noted them after one of my accompanying friends tried to bargain a parrot out of an old lady, comfortably seated in a plastic chair, exchanging money for passing tourists outside the Honduran immigration office. Money dealers were a common feature at every one of these stops.

Our first destiny, however, was not the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa, but San Pedro Sula, from where the first 2020 Migrant Caravan would be leaving soon. We arrived by night-time, and a friendly local priest received us at the bus station. He provided us with warm food and accommodation. A gentle hospitality that would become my foremost impression of the Honduran people I would meet in the next few days.

At his church, we learned that it was time for the annual celebration of the Black Christ of Esquipulas (*Cristo Negro de Esquipulas*), which would happen on January 15, a period on which thousands of Central Americans and Mexican citizens would peregrinate to the Esquipulas' Sanctuary (*Basílica de Esquipulas*). Not coincidently, this also explained why the first Caravan would be leaving soon. The local media had announced that the Caravan would be leaving the city at night on January 15, 2020. The local alternative media, one of them located in the parochial church where we were received, was also organizing themselves to be present at their parting. We had hoped to do the same.

However, on January 14, as we drove along the path that would take us to another city in the metropolitan region of São Pedro Sula, where our lodgings were located, we noticed the presence of people on the side of the road: two here, four more a bit further, and a small group later. Soon, we also noticed the presence of the typical black vans and policemen in their military-style uniforms, carrying (what looked like) rifles, but it was dark, so it was hard to tell. We counted two of those 'patrols' before stopping to discover what was happening. Of course, at that point, we already had an idea: the caravan was leaving almost 24 hours ahead of schedule.

Curious, we stopped next to a group walking on the edge of the road; the only lights were those of passing cars. In this group, four teenagers walked in front, and some adults followed closely, a few steps behind. If they belonged to just one family group, I would

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9   On the UNODC official website, the following definition is presented: "Wildlife trafficking involves the illegal trade, smuggling, poaching, capture, or collection of endangered species, protected wildlife (including animals or plants that are subject to harvest quotas and regulated by permits), derivatives, or products thereof. There is, however, no universally accepted definition of the term and different jurisdictions and organizations employ different terminology (Biegus & Bueger, 2017; UNODC, 2016; Wellsmith, 2011). International organizations, such as UNODC and INTERPOL use the term 'wildlife and forest crime' to 'refer to the taking, trading (supplying, selling or trafficking), importing, exporting, processing, possessing, obtaining and consumption of wild fauna and flora, including timber and other forest products, in contravention of national or international law. Broadly speaking, wildlife and forest crime is the illegal exploitation of the world's wild flora and fauna (UNODC, 2019)'" (Accessed 2 August 2023, online source). Link: https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/wildlife-crime/module-3/key-issues/criminalization-of-wildlife-trafficking.html

not know, and we would not have a chance to ask because they moved faster as soon as we stopped the car. Sitting next to the driver, the young parish priest (our guide at the time) managed to ask one of the young men if the caravan had left; after all, there was a possibility that some of them had gone ahead.

The teenage boy who was questioned, carrying only a small rucksack on his back, nodded and proceeded faster after throwing a suspicious glance in our direction. At that moment, even before we began to move forward, two cargo trucks passed by on our left. They went relatively fast and without much light, but it was still possible to see the mountain of people huddled in a mountain of suitcases in the back of one of the trucks. In the last one, two young men were still clinging to the rear, their bodies dangling.

From this event, two things became clear: first, the group had changed their departure date in a very organized way, and they did it quickly, or they had publicized the wrong date; and second, the presence of police officers who were monitoring their movement seemed to indicate that the local government was aware of this fact. In any case, that vigilant state presence attracted our attention[10]. At that moment, around two hundred Hondurans (Leyva, 2021, p.5) began a long journey toward the 'walled' border between Mexico and the United States. Later, they would be joined by hundreds of Central Americans, Caribbean, and South Americans, including a few Brazilians, such as myself.

The next day, we had planned to leave for Tegucigalpa but decided to learn a little more about local dynamics, particularly those related to migrant populations. What was driving thousands of Honduran citizens to emigrate? What destiny awaited them on the road?

The crossing was dangerous, and many would return to their original country or stay along the way. The history of a young Honduran male offered us the initial insight into the everyday life of Central American returned migrants. A waiter at a popular Mexican bar during the night, the young boy recounted that when he was just a child, he had followed his older sister when she chose to emigrate. Nevertheless, they had to stop their path in Mexico, where he lived for some time, only to return to a family he could hardly recognize years later. Nowadays, in his early 20s, without his parents or older sister, who died shortly after returning to the country, he had two jobs to support his four younger siblings. His story told us a little about the reality of the migration route and those who stay and return to that country without their relatives or in fragmented and disrupted families.

His account of past events is similar to the present experience of other children living in San Pedro Sula's impoverished areas. The account of a charity sister from an international

catholic organization working in one of the poorest urban areas of the cities, where *maquila* workers and their families lived, offers further insight into the issue. Sitting in a simple and aired living room, the head director of the catholic non-profit organization, which provided childcare for the poor families living in the area, explained to us:

> It often happens that the father or the mother goes and when they are there, the family disintegrates. The mother of one of our children did go, taking the youngest child, because it seems that with a small child it is easier… and she left three more children here, with her father. Although [the adults] were already separated. For these children, what they have suffered has been terrible… The sense of family is denaturalized, to the point where you see "there is no family, nothing happens . . . To deal with violence, it is essential to care for the family, in particular for violence against women and children. It is common for them to suffer abuse… But women must believe in themselves, that they can move on. (KII with representative of a humanitarian religious-based organization, San Pedro Sula, HO, January, 2020)

The charity sister's reflection connected us to one of the gravest issues in human insecurity and, indeed, one of the driving factors for migration: domestic violence. The violence against women and children is an effect of the brutalization of everyday life, where survival perspectives are uncertain, and the majority of the population struggles to satisfy their basic needs. In 2015, poverty in Honduras reached 74,3% of the population, in Guatemala 67,7%, and in El Salvador 41,6% and these statistics only worsen when we consider the rural areas (ECLAC, 2018). A survey on the possible drivers for migration identifies that economic reasons, such as unemployment, low family incomes, and pessimistic views of the future, have rates considerably high. Notably, women and girls are disproportionally affected by structural factors linked to economic, political, and social exclusion that intersect with other forms of violence and subjugation associated with their gender (Creative, 2019; Padilla, 2013).

A resilient group of women formulates another particular insight into the everyday struggles of Central American citizens in an imprompt focus group conducted only a few miles from San Pedro Sula in the municipality of *Progreso*. There, we encountered the group of women who founded COFAMIPRO (Committee of Families of the Missing Migrants from Progreso), an organization formed to seek the disappeared migrants on the road to the United States. COFAMIPRO is a fine example of a peace agency that existed since wartime in the 1980s and gradually adapted itself and its protection, advocacy, and accountability networks for times of peace (i.e., developing peace infrastructures). Even before the current caravans, other caravans with a different purpose already had a long history of activism in the region, for example, the Caravan of the Central American Mothers of the Disappeared. This group of women, echoing the perspective of the Guatemalan Lorena Cabnal, presented a singular perspective on migration.

> As COFAMIPRO we are not in favour of people migrating… It is not like saying to people "yes, go!" because we are not going to offer you anything, [but] families are free, people are free to decide their destinies… This migration of today is no longer a migration just out of necessity… we have a government system that in one way or another is driving people to make decisions and the most radical decision at the moment is that they decide to leave with their whole family… it is

a social pressure... We have a socio-political crisis, where the family is no longer interested in the house, they are no longer interested in education, they are no longer interested in social status, what interests them is the preservation of life. "So 'what is better to preserve my life? ... To walk away!' . . . So, what kind of migration is that? A forced migration! That same governmental system is forcing people to leave." (Focus group discussion, *Progreso*, HO, January 2020)

COFAMIPRO's work seeks accountability for the disappeared but also connects to a broader protection network formed by state and non-state agencies in Central America and Mexico. They feel the gaps in migration governance, providing information for the migrants and connecting them to partners in the migration route. They are part of a protection network that does not actively endorse migration but seeks to protect the lives of those forced to flee. On our trip to *Progreso*, where this organization is located, we had the company of a young journalist. An expert in the social problems that affect the country, she spoke about the problems that had not been discussed until then: the actions of organized crime and the division of roles between the armed groups that organize locally to extort, assault, or execute ('*sicarios*') and the drug dealers. Above all, the lack of an organic relationship between them, including their territorial distance. On the way back, we passed by the immigration office at the regional airport, where they informed us that many returnees were arriving on that same date.

Figure 1. *La Prensa.*

Note. Personal archive.

At night, the deserted streets of the city were dimly lit. We arrived at the house of the

sisters of charity, where we were welcomed to spend that night. During the morning, we were there interviewing the group, and at night, we met another younger nun who worked as a nurse at a local hospital. We talked about the situation in the country since the coup in 2009. Since then, the young nurse commented that organized crime has gained importance in social control. Impunity and corruption contributed to a reality in which life was worth less than U$20,00. Apparently, this was the price of hiring a hitman in the region. However, criminal violence was not the only thing putting citizens at risk. Unemployment, hunger, lack of access to basic resources, and the constant labor exploitation in the city and the countryside directly affected the quality of life of a very young and fertile population. The labor exploitation in the *maquilas* is but one example of modern or contemporary forms of slavery that can be found in Central America. As a result, social and gender-based violence is on the rise, particularly regarding sexual abuse and exploitation, frequently involving minors. The families fractured by the migratory movement reflect and deepen the vicious circle of systemic violence, which increases the vulnerability of those who remain on Honduran soil and provokes new waves of migration.

Accountability, social protection, public security, socioeconomic development, and the consolidation and socialization of the rule of law as a state-based mechanism for conflict resolution and violence prevention are some of the peacebuilding challenges facing these fragile regional states. Confronted by these issues, migration governance has risen in 'urgency' and currently levels with other security crises in the regional space. Even so, reliable data remains scarce, and there is also a pressing need to understand how different social groups are affected by migration. In Tegucigalpa, the Observatory of International Migration of Honduras (OMIH), located at the National University of Honduras (UNAH) and the FLACSO headquarters, has been trying to fill this gap. The observatory aims to analyze the migration governance system, considering what the State observes as official information. However, the lack of reliable sources for extracting official data on refugees, immigrants, and returnees is daunting. Not only was there little control over the number of national immigrants, but also, and perhaps most importantly, there is little or no official information on internal displacement, or 'internal refugees,' who are displaced by direct and structural violence without crossing international borders[11].

By heading to Tegucigalpa, we chose a different path from the first 2020 Caravan. Therefore, we started to monitor local newspapers for updates on their progress. Their passage was always on the headlines of Central American news agencies outlets.

As the Caravan left Honduras, crossing to Guatemala, they were met with increasingly

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11 From 2004 to 2018, around 247,090 people were displaced in Honduras, and the government only officially recognized forced displacement in 2013. However, no laws or policies were adopted to deal with the issue until 2022. In July 2022, the initiative of the Law for the Prevention, Care, and Protection of Internally Displaced Persons, first sent to the National Congress in 2019, was reintroduced in the new legislature and approved on 21 December 2022 by the National Congress. (UNHCR/ACNUR, "The Law for the Prevention, Care and Protection of Internally Displaced Persons in Honduras and the work of UNHCR, Honduras IDP Law" – April 2023) (Accessed 2 August 2023, online source). Link: https://reliefweb.int/report/honduras/honduras-idp-law-april-2023.

protected borders, facing riot police personnel and their dispersal shots, which were timely reported by the local media on their path. The migratory movement repression at the Guatemalan border was only overshadowed by their encounter with the Mexican border agents a week later on the country's southern border. However, by that time, many more Central-American, South American, Caribbean, and extra-continental people, with diverse motives, had joined them, and they would push their way forward until mounting La Bestia: the Mexican cargo trains that cross the country towards the Northern border with the United States. Those able to survive the perilous path would not find a welcoming reception in their transit and final destinations. Nonetheless, they moved with purpose, as the precarious life in their own countries of origin had made the choice of immigration about survival more than anything.

El Salvador: The Liminal Border

From Honduras, we left for El Salvador, the trip taking around 9 hours. At that time, our route had deviated from the route taken by Honduran migrants, who would follow, in quite ostentatious groups, to the closest border crossing between Honduras and Guatemala, Corinto and Aguas Calientes. This caravan, in particular, took advantage of its proximity with the January 15 celebration of the Black Christ of Esquipulas, when many Central Americans crossed the borders of Guatemala on a pilgrimage to the Basilica Sanctuary of the Crucified Christ of Esquipulas.

Figure 2. NTCA *Border Posts.*

Note. From Google Maps.

This part of the trip should have been the third crossing in our route to the Northern Mexican border. Nevertheless, if one looks at my passport, no stamp of crossing the Salvadoran borders (entering or leaving) will be found. Thus, the question remains: Did we ever cross it?

Well, we got off the bus in San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador. However, only our cell phone pictures and a few eyewitnesses could prove it as well. On every border crossing, state legibility appears in the normative and bureaucratic practices through which the passing foreigners or transient citizens are recognized by entering or leaving, such as paying tariffs, signing forms, or getting stamps on passports, usually with a space for the entry and departure dates, signaling the days one remains within given political borders. The feeling we get is that 'somebody' knows we are there. However, out of the three days we were in El Salvador, not one day was registered in our documents, there were no stamps on our passports, nor did we sign any form or pay an entry rate. 'Nobody' knew we were there.

The crossing from Honduras to El Salvador was full of contrasts. In Honduras, we followed the familiar practice of descending the bus and passing through customs and immigration. In El Salvador, however, the crossing was similar to a bus top in the middle of the road. The bus headed into an open space. Border control officers boarded the bus and walked along the passenger's aisle. We were told to have our passports at hand, but no one asked for them. Some passengers, suspiciously looking perhaps, were invited to get out of the bus for a brief interview. For example, one of them was a man in his forties, accompanied by two very young girls (also asked to get off the bus) dressed quite exuberantly; the other one was a single man traveling in a party of five, which – as I was told before by one of them – was heading to the Mexican border for a cargo, which day would drive back. They all returned moments later, and we went back on the road, all the while thinking, 'What now?'

Until then, I had not considered the pre-recommended safety measures, such as calling the embassy and informing them of your presence in the country. Nonetheless, neither had I given much attention to how some forms of state legibility produce or affect security dynamics. I felt insecure about what should be done, walking the fine line between regularity and irregularity. I was, we were, for all purposes, unaccounted in the state's registries: simply 'off the radar,' or so I felt. IOM (2019) defines an irregular migrant as someone who has crossed an international border and is not authorized to enter or remain in a state under that state's law, as discussed in the first chapter. However, authorization presupposes some degree of state legibility over transient bodies, and there was none we could provide, for as we left, again, no stamps were registered in our passports.

The circulating Salvadoran currency was perhaps the only form of state legibility, although not mainly linked to border control. Even then, the dollar coins make this legibility ambiguous. The country's dependence on its monetary politics is another problem enumerated by Salvadoran inhabitants. Moreover, the country's economy seems to orbit around its natural tourism and ongoing remittances. Finally, we could see that social violence and organized crime were markedly present in the daily lives of

its inhabitants. The city was visibly divided into 'safe spaces' and those where 'nothing guarantees' what could happen. Notably, these safe spaces were guaranteed by the explicit presence of *carabineros* carrying heavy weapons in public spaces. With the clear objective of dissuading violence, the State police and military personnel succeeded in creating focal points of an apparent (negative) 'peace' amid social chaos.

On the second day in El Salvador, there was an interview with an academic at UCA (Universidad Centroamericana), who provided a critical diagnosis of the reality in the country. In particular, how violence and its effects are currently organized within society. From this conversation, I took away his perspective on the local criminal gangs (*maras* and *pandillas*) and his description of an obscure pact between the government and the *pandillas* between 2012 and 2014:

> *Pandillas* are part of the social fabric. Here it was said that… because let's say there is a figure that there are about 30,000 gang members, around 30,000 gang members there are half a million people who live with them. That is social fabric.
>
> But the government's vision, and again the black-and-white vision of society, separates blacks and whites, that is, it is based on the concept of conflict where there are good and bad, while the Salvadorans in the middle and the government continue to sell only what they want to see in the mirror, a pretty reflection, a pretty face, which is not that (of reality)... So, if not, if you consider that they are all parts of that conflictive reality, then is not so easy to jump and equalize the other... More, well, the vision seems to be, to separate the good and the bad, and at least from that perspective not understanding that the social fabric is that... It is full of people who survive as best as they can, living off criminal economies, and as long as it continues like this, nothing will change. For example, the truce that was made between 2012 and 2014, a pact that was even criminal, and dark, but carried a kind of perverse nobody question that answered. Is it the truce that was made that lower the homicides?. Between the government and the gangs. Because it was a deal, literally, that is, they stop killing each other and we leave them alone. That's a matter of language… of the *pandillas*, if you cannot get out of it, you can calm down.
>
> We calm down, but what do you give me in return? If I stop being who I am, from exercising the violence that I exercise, what do you give to the 30,000 young people who are behind me, and the half million people who are behind me, who live from what I do? And society could not provide an answer to these young people, but the government had an answer.
>
> What it did was make the crime more refined, and dark, that they kept killing but not in such a visible way. And the theme of the disappearance reappears. People even began to talk about sanctuary municipalities… they were places where the government no longer needed to worry about arriving since the gangs were the ones who dominated. And interesting but perverse situations begin to appear, in which criminal groups maintained order. Because it was not convenient for them to have a problem, because it attracted the police, so they maintained harmony. They had control, rent over people, control over women's bodies, completely. There is even news that they had come to control the color of clothing, of hairstyles... So those things happened just under the eye of the state. It was a dark, perverse pact, there were thousands of people involved as if they were negotiating votes... but, apart from that, there has been no real plan to approach the issue of violence... it

has already gone out of hand. (KII Salvadoran academic, San Salvador, SV, January, 2020)

Since January 2020, when this interview was conducted, Nayib Bukele's crackdown on *maras* and *pandillas* with renewed '*mano dura*' policies, after declaring a prolonged state of exception in El Salvador, has changed the scenario described above in several ways. Citizen security was strengthened, in opposite correlation with the enjoyment of fundamental human rights[12]. In the southern Mexican border, in February 2023, I received news that Salvadorans were now fleeing their home country, fearing state persecution, as 'suspected' gang members. Perhaps this is just a marginal push factor for migration, but it may have the consequential effect of transforming organized crime dynamics within the region.

Back to 2020 and our short stay in El Salvador, we entered on January 16 and crossed the border again on January 19, three days when, without our passports stamped, we feared we were in an irregular condition. The day we left for Guatemala City, we again chose to cross the border during the day, traveling early in the morning. Once more, no formal passing through customs or immigration awaited us. However, another curious fact about the El Salvador border crossing happened just before arriving at the Guatemalan border. Strangely enough, the bus stopped a few miles from the border, advising us there was food and bathrooms available on the roadside and that this would be the only stop. Attracted by the thought of food, we got off the bus and were immediately surrounded by money dealers, poorly dressed but carrying stacks of money like I had never seen. In reflection, perhaps this was the unofficial reason for stopping, perhaps not. Regardless, the established dynamic between service transport, border patrol, and the locally engendered money exchange market was particularly eye-catching throughout the journey.

Guatemala: The Fourth Crossing

While uncertain about the next crossing, we continued the journey without stamps on our passports. It would take us 6 hours to arrive at Guatemala City. However, the border control facility in Guatemala was certainly more structured than El Salvador's. As in Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, we first went through customs and then with immigration officials. At that moment, I realized an interesting fact: being Brazilian and a woman made my 'mobility' across Central American borders somewhat suspicious. First, they asked me when I would be back. I informed the migration officer that I was going to Mexico and received an even more direct question: 'And then to the United States?' (The

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12   International media and human rights-based organizations, national and international, have denounced the systematic violation of human rights in El Salvador. See Amnesty International brief report, "Resident Bukele engulfs El Salvador in a human rights crisis after three years in government," or WOLAS communication/analysis of "A Year of Suspended Civil Liberties in El Salvador," and Lara Toscana publication, "Security at the Expense of Human Rights: The Case of El Salvador's 'Megacárcel.'"

sarcasm intended!). It was clear the officer was suspicious that I was traveling as a tourist but with other intentions. The only saving grace was that it did not matter that we lacked the Salvadoran stamps, as it was an expected ordeal.

Unlike San Salvador and Tegucigalpa, Guatemala City offered us a well-developed urban setting with opulent condos and shopping districts. However, on the morning of January 20, our first meeting with a prosecutor at Guatemala's Public Ministry would present a deeper look at the conditions of violence running through and under the structures of peace. The interview addressed two main topics: the spread presence of organized crime and the violence against women. The following is an excerpt taken from the interview.

> PM: Let's say one of the country's problems is violence, let's say… criminal violence and its different types. Perhaps they are the criminal groups and organizations that are generating the most violence... and the criminal camp is the gangs... Here the biggest ones are the ones most people know, which are the Barrio 18 gang and the Mara Salvatrucha gang (MS), right? These two gangs have grown so much, let's say, in the last few decades that they have been getting stronger... and to this day I could say that they are the two criminal organizations that generate more violence than any other criminal organization. Well, given that for them to exist, they have to find money, let's say, and that way of finding money is through different crimes and one of the main crimes is extortion, they also commit robberies... (incomprehensible), vehicle thefts, sometimes they do quick kidnappings, but that modality has dropped a lot. But, what is number one is extortion. And within this dynamic of crimes is that violence is generated. Well, they come, to collect the money, they attack the person, they kill them, well... and that is what has risen, let's say... a high rate of violent deaths. Product of extortion by gangs. . . . Among the crimes that they have... cases have been detected in which they are engaged in selling illegal drugs and it is important, it must be taken into account that these are not only from Guatemala but from the Central American region and they have focused a lot on this problem in the Northern Triangle, which is Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. A phenomenon has been taking place in which they… since they are territorial, they take hold of the territories and see them as theirs. So, since Central America is, let's say… a drug corridor, they have taken advantage of that opportunity and are getting more and more involved in moving drugs. So since they are criminal people, they take advantage of that drug path and are already getting fully involved, to strengthen themselves as a group... doing not only extortion, but also drug trafficking.
>
> A: And what other forms of conflict are involved in that context?
>
> PM: Yes, let's say that we are talking about this phenomenon of gangs, if we look at it as a phenomenon, in reality, this is a multifactorial problem, let's say, then, when we talk about multifactorial problems, we are talking, for example, of terrible economies, of dependent countries, right? We also have disintegrated homes, and repressive policies, excluding policies of different governments that have been in the state. We also have a lot of marginalization, right? Growth of marginal areas and a lot of migration that occurs, let's say, from some departments that are looking for opportunity this… here in the city. It mainly occurred in the eighties, apart from the migration that I mentioned... Many people from different ethnic groups have come here looking for better opportunities. And that has accelerated since 1976 when the earthquake here in Guatemala gave an acceleration in this crisis that was the armed conflict in the eighties, then these migrations will rise tremendously... and what they

come here to do is occupy what we call the green belts of the city. (KII, PM, Guatemala city, January, 2020)

This meeting was followed by another with public employees of the Human Rights Attorney Office, committed to supporting indigenous and peasant demands, especially concerning land occupations and their undue exploitation. The last interview of that day was in the early afternoon, with a Guatemalan academic, who spoke about the political situation, gangs, drug traffickers, and the migrant's situation, highlighting the role of remittances from abroad in the state's income. Hence, the day ended with a complete diagnostic of Guatemala's situation in 2020. Three years later, little had changed, though the homicide rates that had gone down over the last years were seemingly rising again (Mendoza & Robles, 2023). More than ever, the country was committed to barring the entry of irregular migrants, militarizing the border with Honduras, and deporting those individuals found within the country in non-compliance with their immigration laws (Cuffe, 2021; Silva Avalos, 2023).

Figure 3. *Debris near Volcano of Fire, January 2020.*

Note. Personal archive.

In 2020, on the following days in Guatemala, we visited fishing villages, churches, and museums, experiencing the religious syncretism preserved in the population's local customs between the Mayan deities and the Catholic saints. However, on the 14th day of travel, a young Guatemalan guiding us through the region accompanied us to the site of a great tragedy less than two years earlier. The strong eruption of the Volcano of Fire decimated an entire town at its feet. Official figures estimate that 300 people lost their lives in that disaster, but our Guatemalan companion, who volunteered during the relief efforts, said the number would be in the thousands. Almost two years later, the remains of the tragedy were still in sight.

Natural hazards and catastrophes such as this are not uncommon in the region and have represented another driver for forced displacement within and across borders. These

days, we were again monitoring the local outlets for information on the progress of the Caravan, and we knew by then that Mexico had increased surveillance on its borders before the Caravan's imminent arrival.

Mexico: The Last Crossing

We left Ciudad de Guatemala in the early morning of January 23, prepared for another day on the road, hoping to cross the border and arrive in Tapachula (MEX) mid-afternoon. Our next destination would be San Cristóbal de Las Casas in Chiapas, Mexico. It was a long journey, and there was much traffic to the border, the cause of which we would find out later. We arrived at the Guatemala-Mexican border early in the evening, between 7:30 p.m. and 8 p.m., passing through the Guatemalan post in Tucum Unman without much issue, before arriving at Ciudad Hidalgo, where the first Mexican border post is located. We discovered that on the same day, during the afternoon, the first Central American Caravan had reached the border between Guatemala and Mexico. On foot or in trucks full of people, they sought to cross the border and were met with unwelcoming state agents on the Mexican side.

The Caravan's violent encounter with the Mexican border authorities and patrol officers was registered in the local news, as we would discover later that night. It was already night-time when our small group also reached the Mexican border. We should have arrived earlier, but the Caravan procession had delayed our road trip, causing a few miles of heavy traffic. Nonetheless, when we finally arrived, migration officers, unwilling to let us pass, would receive us. The catch was that only two of us (from the whole bus), single women traveling alone, faced this problem. One of the officers withheld the passport of my Costa Rican colleague; another officer, while interrogating me and to whom I had to inform that I was not traveling alone, immediately asked me to call '*la Mexicana*' (i.e., the Mexican woman) who was traveling with me and, after that, he no longer addressed me. Even after I answered that I could, in fact, speak Spanish (or *Castellano*). In front of that border control 'male' officer, I lost my voice.

Some facts must be known to understand the dynamics: first, in our bus, there was a variety of people from European, Asian, and, of course, Latin American backgrounds. Mostly, they were male and over forty. There were women, of course, but my colleagues and I, although in our thirties, looked the youngest. I remember an Asian middle-aged woman and a North American (quite drunk) middle-aged man. All were able to pass without a problem, including the drunk '*gringo*'. My colleague from Costa Rica and I would not experience the same easiness when it was our turn to cross. Things happened simultaneously, and we were unclear about what was happening. While the officers took the documents from my colleague and told her to sit and wait, my Mexican colleague and I were interrogated. After several questions, they showed us a list of documents we had to provide for entrance, like hotel bookings and airplane tickets leaving Mexico. We had them all, of course, but they told us we had to print them and leave a copy with them. As those documents were never

required before, we had no printed copies. The Mexican officers offered a simple solution: cross the border again, on foot, to the Guatemalan side and print it over there, for we could not pass otherwise.

The problem is, it was night-time (around 8:30 p.m.). There were no lights or shining paths to follow, and we had crossed the border while still on the bus. We had no idea what to do, but the option we were given seemed quite dangerous. The sense of vulnerability increased further when the bus driver told us they could not wait for us any longer. The rest of the passengers were waiting.

Nevertheless, the feeling of vulnerability was not only induced by the new security-engendered bureaucratic practices, which we later discovered had been reinforced at the beginning of that year. Another curious fact about this border was the imposing presence of non-uniformed 'officers.' That is the presence of civilian-dressed men, some of them bearing ID cards around their necks and others without any apparent identification as government officials, who, with the same authority, controlled the comings and goings of the border post, bearing the passage of those unwelcome individuals, while allowing others to pass. Hence, it was tough to identify who was a state agent and who was not.

In that hostile environment, some good was found when a few kind-hearted officers took pity on us and allowed our Mexican colleague to enter the border office and print everything on that same establishment. Next, we had to fill out an almost ten-page long form and pay the tariff to enter; at that time, it was around U\$20,00, which many arriving immigrants could not afford. From then on, and throughout the time I was in Mexico, I carried the immigration documents they gave me (valid for 20 days) since they warned me that if I lost them, I would be 'illegal.' For them, it seems, I was not the 'tourist' I had fashioned myself to be, and my mobility was monitored every step of the way, be it on roads or planes. From the southern to the northern Mexican border, I was asked to provide those papers every time I crossed some Mexican state authority, my 'regularity' under suspicion until proven otherwise.

The first time the authorities tested my 'regularity' was that same night while we were on another bus headed to San Cristobal de Las Casas, Chiapas. The bus stopped in the middle of the road, officers bearing guns when up and down the aisle. Inside the bus, most passengers were sleeping. I was seated with my colleague from Mexico, and we were both asked to provide our migration documents. Again, we were the only ones asked. I can still remember my colleague's indignant expression, reacting to the solicitation: 'But I am Mexican!'

From San Cristobal de Las Casas, we moved to Oaxaca, the capital city, and we chose to fly this time. Migratory papers at hand, we passed without much issue, although the security check was very tight, and nothing – even a closed package of the local *mole* – was allowed to pass. In Oaxaca, although the migratory path remained the main topic to be addressed in every interview, other issues – more closely related to Mexico's public security agenda – were arising further attention and, on many occasions, they would interconnect with the 'migration problem,' most importantly, the subject of armed violence connected to the social control imposed by the domestic and transnational organized crime, and the endemic violence against women.

A note on the topic is that since we arrived at the southern Mexican states, and before that, as we passed through Guatemala, violence against women was very high on citizen security agendas, notably due to the increase in the number of femicides (i.e., the killing of a woman because of her gender). This term was first established to address killings in the Mexican city of Ciudad Juárez (Mexican border with the U.S.), usually following sexual violations. That is not always the case, however, as femicide is a hate crime and, with a culture so strongly focused on armed violence and 'dominant masculinities,' women are not only subject to oppression but also increasingly perceived as drivers of social change or resistance forces against the predominant culture. The social control imposed by armed groups, associated with the predominant culture of *machismo*, and the social changes produced by the massive male migration towards the U.S. have exacerbated the vulnerable conditions of numerous women-led households. Hence, as we traveled north from the southern border, migration and gender-based violence were to become the main focuses of our investigation.

In Oaxaca, one the poorest states in Mexico, immigration towards the U.S. had long since changed the face of local societies. To understand how, one must first understand the demographic composition of this state department, where many rural municipalities are based on the normative indigenous systems of *usos y costumbres* (i.e., customs and habits). Poverty and lack of adequate work or education opportunities are some of the factors that have driven the local male population to migrate towards the North. Women-led households, in a culture where women are not able to participate in the public space, increase women's vulnerability towards sexual and labor exploitation. Many have become victims of human trafficking, for example, or are morally and sexually abused by their own families (domestic violence), as well as those who submit to labor exploitation in conditions similar to slavery to support their dependents (children and elderly people). For one of our local interviewees, Lopez Obrador's policies on higher education (introducing scholarship programs, for example) could provide some changes in this context by presenting the local population with better life opportunities. Nonetheless, the impact of past migration, predominantly by the male population, had profoundly changed local societies. Some of the most impoverished rural/urban enclaves have become dependent on remittances, and the risk factors associated with women's mobility in public spaces have also increased.

Although few studies have addressed the topic with empirical evidence (Wright, 2011; Macedo, 2021), it seemed to me that violence against women was strongly correlated with zones where illicit trafficking and smuggling is the main security issue; what is possible to observe when one considers Mexico's states with Gender-based Violence Alert (GBVA), where violence against women is on the rise, such as Chiapas, Oaxaca, Nuevo León, Jalisco, Veracruz, Quintana Roo, Baja California, among others. All these states are paths for people trafficking and smuggling, and not coincidently, strongly connected to narcotrafficking activities. When one of our interviewees was asked what the most common forms of violence against women are, she emphasized the public transportation sector:

> Depending on the sectors that we focus, like in transport, we have harassment, theft, we have abuse, touching, harassment sexual violence, rape and, well, the maximum expression of hate that can be, feminicide. The sector of transportation is one of the

most violent we have. That's why we have a security measure that speaks specifically to women's mobility. (KII with female police agent, Oaxaca, MX, January, 2020)

As we left Oaxaca, towards Mexico City, again by plane, we expected a change of dynamics. The Caravan will follow the road or the train rails towards the U.S. border. Their path was already completely distant from ours. Nevertheless, we would still follow some of them to the North, as we were headed to the Mexican state of Chihuahua, which borders the U.S. state of Texas. My final destination was Ciudad Juárez, but before that, a visit to two very different settings was planned: first, Mexico City; then, Chihuahua and the Sierra Tarahumara, in the northern mountains of the border state of Chihuahua.

In Mexico City, we would find a world apart from the one we had immersed ourselves in until now. The city was both the political and economic center of Mexico. Although it preserved much of Mexican history from ancient to modern periods, it was the most cosmopolitan environment we have seen: a mix of the old, the new, and those iconic spaces of transition where the post-modern culture finds its niche. Moreover, while discussing post-modernity, we cannot ignore the variety of social transformations and movements happening here and there. A very active and internationalized civil society connected Mexico to the future, rewriting history through art, music, and social protests. The feminist movement against the rising rates of violence against women, known as '*Las Pintas en el Ángel*'[13], was just one of those happening as we visit the city.

After one full day in Mexico, we left the next morning towards Chihuahua, where my Mexican colleague lives: we were bringing her home. We had an early flight, and all seemed to go smoothly despite the plane being late. In the boarding line, a Colombian musician, bearing his instrument in one arm and a bag in the other, was quite incensed, and although I had some clue about the problem, I still asked why. He explained that he had arrived early but had been taken to the Migration office for further inspection. In Migration, he had to explain quite clearly why he traveled to Chihuahua. A Colombian male adult, relatively young and traveling alone, seemed to meet all the requirements for 'illegal' immigration. Nonetheless, he had all the documents to prove he was invited to work and would stay for only a few days. So, although he would probably remain under suspicion, *Migración* had to let him go. I could only sympathize, as my situation was not that different.

Around two hours later, we arrived at Chihuahua Airport. Chihuahua City was utterly different from what we have seen so far. The northern part of Mexico had not only a different climate but also a different culture. At least in part, as proximity with the U.S. had produced something hybrid, not quite Mexican, no quite *gringo*: cowboys walked everywhere, American football played on the local televisions of all restaurants and bars, where locals would eat the traditional (and very spiced) *tacos* and *gorditas* (stuffed tortillas). We only stayed for a night before going to Sierra Tarahumara, but my impression of Chihuahua was such.

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13   This is a reference to graffiti that a feminist movement painted on the Column of Independence (i.e., 'El Ángel') as a response to the long history of violence against women, reflected in femicides, disappearances, and abuses by the authorities.

In Sierra Tarahumara, a place known for the beautiful mountains and picturesque caves, where the ethnic Tarahumaras still live, another scenario awaited us. It was a place of past and present violence, where symbols of peace – one strategically placed on the entry point of the beautiful *Pueblo Mágico* of Creel - more than reality, represented people's wishes to move beyond past violence, but without forgetting it. It was a form of dealing with the past and hoping for the future. The reality, however, was quite different: the region was a place of dispute for the Mexican cartels, with local factions competing for control. The police station was abandoned, with broken windows and bullet roles stamped on the exterior walls; instead of the local municipal police, the National Guard staff and vehicles could be seen in various locations. Two weeks earlier, I believe, as we went on the Central American road, news had arrived that two social leaders were killed in the region. Therefore, their presence is not unexpected. Even so, here and there, individual groups, families, and buses full of tourists could be seen throughout the small town. Tourism was flourishing, indeed.

From the cold mountain range of Sierra Tarahumara, where temperatures fell below zero to minus four degrees Celsius (-4 C), we moved back to Chihuahua. The next day, my colleague from Costa Rica left, and, at the same time, I was supposed to head towards Ciudad Juárez. Unfortunately, the roads were closed due to the snow that fell during the night, and I had to wait for the next day. The next day, February 6, I left alone for Ciudad Juárez, bearing my migration papers. On the road, we passed many police patrols, and two times, the bus had to stop for inspection. One of those, all passengers had to disembark and line up for papers check. The line was short; all would show their documents and embark on the bus again. I was one of the last, and when my turn came, naively, I had hoped it would be the same. Nonetheless, the military officer (yes, 'military' officer) who was checking the documents saw my passport and migration papers (of course, with the entry in Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas) and took me apart from my fellow passengers, leading me to a van, where I was invited to enter and take a seat. The questions at this point had changed from the usual (the reason for my travel, where I would stay, and for how long) to inquiries about my work, my contacts, and who I would meet. Invasive, yes, but understandable from their point of view. After this last set of questions, I returned to the bus and was again on the road to Ciudad Juárez.

The trip to the border was around four hours, and we mainly rode in a straight line through the cold desert. Almost upon arrival, I saw the train rails leading to Juárez station. I was there in Juárez for four nights and five days, and during this period, I met journalists, academics, social workers, and those who worked on assistance programs or managed some of the many shelters in the region. I also visited the city's peripherical areas, poor urban communities, and the immense compound of maquilas close to the borders. One of the most shocking sights was the crosses carved into the sands of the desert that surrounded the city on top of a hill. These crosses were erected to remember 'the dead women of Juárez,' women found dead in the region, without any identification of those responsible. A form of crime that remains an open wound in Juárez society. Indeed, several interviews conducted in Oaxaca, as well as Ciudad Juárez, have brought to the table the intimate connection between migration, organized crime, and gender-based violence.

Figure 4. Outskirts of Ciudad Juárez, February 2020.

Note. Personal archive.

In my last interview with a shelter manager, he mentioned that from the almost eight hundred people who left or incorporated themselves into the January 2020 Central American caravan, around 40 people had arrived in the region, and all of them were in poor health condition, some of them needing immediate medical support. When asked what nationalities were the most received there, he pointed to Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Cuba. Also, the majority of Central Americans came from Honduras; this is a tendency reflected in the total number of Border Patrol encounters registered on the U.S. border for the following year (figure 5). Unfortunately, as the shelter manager explained, most could only count on the government's basic assistance as they waited for their asylum request to be validated, which could take 6 months to 1 year if not more.

Figure 5. *Southwest Land Border Encounters.*
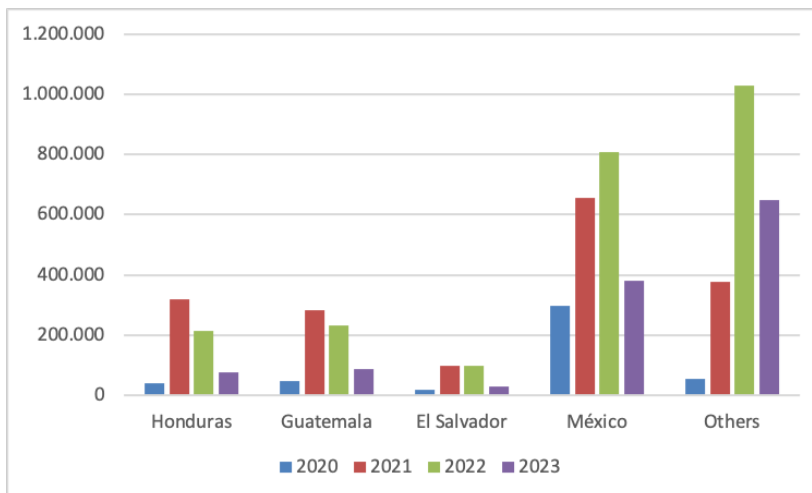
Note. From CBP Public Data Portal.

On the Mexican border with the United States, assistance to arriving immigrants and displaced people came less from the state than from active civil society organizations, many of them religious-based. The protection system these organizations operated on involved local, national, and international organizations from all over the region, with close ties to the United States regarding funds and institutional support. Two of the projects visited at the time operated with support from U.S. civil society organizations, one supporting migrants and another aimed at violence prevention in the town's peripheral areas. When asked about state support, most of those who participated in the interviews mentioned a lack of support or support through basic health assistance and facilitation of work permits. Some had even denounced state officials and security agents on both sides of the border as drivers of insecurity. In sum, for Ciudad Juárez that year, the state was not the driving force.

Resilient Agencies in the Migration Route

From natural hazards, climate-induced or otherwise, extreme poverty, armed violence due to political tension, land disputes, and the actions of organized crime, including extorsions, killings, and kidnapping, to the deeply entrenched gender-based violence, the drivers of forced migration are many and varied. There is no simple line of causation and effect. The caravans would continue over the following years, facing increasingly institutionalized repression on their way, as borders were closed due to the sanitarian crisis and militarized over contingency security narratives (Silva Avalos, 2023). However, there was one important change in their progress; since 2021, they were not organized in *San Pedro Sula* but in *Tapachula*, and the ones who participated in them were from various Latin American and extra-continental countries. Tapachula was the site of small Caravans before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, during the sanitarian crisis, with more rigid immigration laws throughout Central America, these caravans would grow in size and frequency.

In October 2021, after a long wait for the Mexican National Migration Institute (INM) to process their asylum applications, the migrants stranded in Tapachula formed one of the largest caravans to date, with thousands of people. According to one of its members, there were approximately 4,000 people, mainly from Central America, among whom dozens of pregnant young women and around a thousand children (Benotman, 2021). Others such as this would be organized in the following years, and the last to make news left the border town on April 23, 2023, after the catastrophic events in a migrant detention center in Ciudad Juárez, where 40 people died (Phillips & Chávez, 2023). The April caravan was organized with around 2,000 people. Within the contingent, there were family groups with young girls and boys, adolescents, as well as people with disabilities, the elderly, pregnant women, and people from the LGBTTTIQ+ community (CNDH, 2023).

These caravans represent the collective will of many individuals and families who fled poverty, hunger, and more direct forms of violence, seeking survival and better living conditions (i.e., human dignity). By organizing regularly and mobilizing thousands of people and material resources, including migrant networks and migrants-based organizations, they represent an emergent form of social movement within the region. Their aim is visibility, while the plight of thousands of them remains hidden and unaccounted for. A silent phenomenon, as some would describe it (Braga et al., 2023).

Three years after the first fieldwork mission to Central America and Mexico, I went back to Mexico, choosing different locations this time. While not revisiting Ciudad Juárez, I went to the southern border (*Tapachula*) and the northern border of Mexico (*Tijuana - BC and Chihuahua - CH*). On those last missions, although time was short, I had the opportunity to observe the sanitarian crisis's lasting impacts on regional security dynamics and, thus, the logic of peace formation within the region. In total, 37 key informant interviews were conducted in the three cities, and their findings contribute to an in-depth analysis of the humanitarian context addressed in the last section and the emerging changes in context during the COVID-19 pandemic[14].

Some changes had only reinforced existing patterns, a sign of their resilience in adverse settings, such as the presence of migrant networks and migrants-based organizations helping to support people on the move, forcibly displaced, or seeking integration in their current destinations. Migrants-based organizations in *Tijuana and Tapachula* operated locally, nationally, and through transnational networks. Shelters were the main form of support, but there were others: human rights protection and advocacy-based organizations focusing on gender-based violence, health, and trauma healing; organizations offering juridical assistance, protection (through 'safe houses,' for example), and accompaniment to people on the move; while others would offer truth and justice to the disappeared and victimized people on the migration route. In turn, migrant networks, being more fluid and transnational, were significantly affected by the contextual changes, such as economic shocks and political interests, and, thus, quickly became the target of other transnational actors, operating on a more illicit front and benefiting from the new bordering policies, such as smuggling and trafficking organizations (Parker, 2023).

In response to the increased vulnerability of people on the move during the pandemic years, interagency dialogues became a more common practice in both northern and southern borders, particularly through virtual connections, making contact easier and more regular for all stakeholders, national and international, with a vested interest on the topic, to participate. These dialogues also facilitated, at least on the Southern border, the connection between state and non-state agencies on issues involving migration and citizen security, as some of the participants interviewed in *Tapachula* commented. The changes in these protection systems reflect the growing proximity between state and non-state agencies in humanitarian response but also inform us of the adaptive, resilient nature of such systems when connecting with migrant-based networks and organizations.

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14   This research advance brings only some limited preliminary results of the last fieldwork missions, focusing more on the research conducted in 2020.

The caravans never stopped, but their strategies did change, and so did the structures of conflict and peace where they were embedded. The securitized processes, the militarization of borders, and the systemic corruption of state officials increased the risk of the journey to the U.S. border and the price to pay for it. The caravans signaled a need for change in the current protection system and were responded to by a turn to development and violence prevention. Several policies and projects were implemented in the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA), supported by international funds, and aimed to reintegrate returned migrants and prevent new immigration up north. Forced migration, however, continued over the years (2020-2023), as the mounting flows of migration and border patrol encounters on the U.S. side of the border seem to indicate. Why? The question was presented in the introduction of this work and must be asked again here because no answer is forthcoming. The drivers are many and varied; to choose one is to silence the others. In all, however, mobility is seen as a necessity, a need, and those who offer some measure of support or protection to said movement, migrants-based networks, and organizations have strived to reduce and mitigate the risks of violence and victimization, consolidating social ties and protection systems.

Conclusion

Liberal peace, or even the elite-led peacebuilding processes, failed to deliver adequate peace dividends (in terms of political and economic inclusion, social justice, and more) for large parcels of Central American populations. Marginalized groups (i.e., the excluded majority) and, among them, displaced communities, diaspora networks, and return migrants have been described as a complex issue in humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding programs. However, what does complexity entail? Complexity thinking indicates that small, unobservable differences in a system's routine dynamics could, in repeated iterations, have important long-term effects (Jessop, 1999). They are, thus, small emergencies in a long-term process of social transformation. In order to address these emergent events, the *peace formation* approach offers the possibility of re-positioning critical forms of agency within the social and political process of peacebuilding and development that have systematically contributed to shaping the regional peace process in unobserved (or unaccounted) ways. Through this lens, we turn the focus of peacebuilding and migration governance to its most active actors, i.e., migrant networks and migrant-based organizations. They emerge not only as 'victims' or 'political subjects' but as part and process of building peace in Central America.

Peacebuilding, within the liberal framework and its governmentalization technologies based on securitized practices, involves multiple actors, issues, and dimensions of social and political life. Nonetheless, it has remained state-centric, focusing on the state and refurbishing political authority under a liberal and democratic frame. In this complex process, a crisis entails a moment of rupture in emerging social change. The causes and the drivers are many, as analyzed by discussing the four transformational processes within the peace process and the strong influence these endogenous transformations receive from the international system. Among them, the transnationalization phenomenon creates a paradox within the drivers for social change: the frictional engagement between state-centered pacification processes (i.e., state-building) and the more transnationalized approaches to peacebuilding, where multiple forms of agency converge.

Like this, the Central American migrant caravans, portrayed as a societal crisis, may also indicate the emergence of profound internal and external changes to the state-based, elite-led, and transnationalized peace processes. These changes have been happening for some time, but now they exceeded the system's capacity to deal with them and preserve its current equilibrium. As emergent social movements, the Caravans are a signal of social change. Hence, instead of a threat confronted by securitizing migration or, even more, strong-holding national borders, the caravans represent an opportunity to understand how migration has played a fundamental role in alleviating the fragile Central American States, promoting social cohesion and economic development. These flows are not illegal and threat-inducing; on the contrary, they are part of the changes in the social landscape of transitioning Central American societies. However, they also expose the many challenges faced by those put forcibly on the move in their path or final destinations: assault, rape,

kidnapping, exposure, and co-option to criminal networks and labor exploitation. Therefore, not their existence but their increasing vulnerability must be problematized.

To face these challenges, new forms of governance and non-state agencies have risen to fill the gap left by the regional states and institutions, such as migrant networks and organizations, creating thrust networks that help ameliorate their insecurity and violent conditions. They represent critical peace agencies in the regionally engendered social transformations from war to peace systems. However, two parallel steps must be taken to transform the current crisis into an opportunity: first, de-securitize the state-based approach to migration, and second, include migrant networks and migrant-based organizations in designing the next steps, as they are at the 'frontlines' in this so-called 'crisis.'

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